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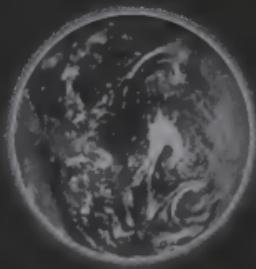
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## ROSE-TINTED GOGGLES

When I was in school, SF was usually labeled "escapist fiction." Since the stories were often set in the future and dealt with aliens or mind reading or time travel, it was assumed that they glossed over real life issues. My teachers assured me that I would soon outgrow my fascination with science fiction and settle down with more adult literature. As an inveterate reader, I actually enjoyed all sorts of fiction and I knew that while there were many different types of conventional tales, there were just as many varieties of SF. I might read Edgar Rice Burroughs just for fun, but Robert Silverberg and Ursula K. Le Guin were as capable of shining the cold light of reality on the human condition as any mainstream author. Still, one thing science fiction certainly had going for it was its cool toys.

An early enthusiasm for SF is often sparked by these toys—starships, ray-guns, and alien action-figures can capture a child's imagination long before they read through *Dune* or *The Foundation Trilogy*. Although I discovered the toys long after I began reading the stories, I'm still a sucker for novelty spaceships and little red robots. On a superficial level, at least, one of the major attractions of the relatively new subgenre, steampunk, is its *really* cool toys. Steampunk has goggles and dirigibles, it has dress-up clothes for you or your dolls and gorgeous brass time machines. Most of all, steampunk has trains.

As a child, we want to get down on our hands and knees and play with those trains. Who doesn't enjoy watching the little train choo-chooing past the Victorian village under the Christmas tree? As adults, it's easy to imagine ourselves riding in a first-class compartment—dining off bone china and sipping wine from cut

crystal glassware. Speeding into the past, our imagination takes us away on these trains almost as fast as the rocket ships of our daydreams take us into the future.

Of course, just as accurate predictions of the future are rare in SF, so too are realistic depictions of the past. We know that most of the people who traveled in those trains weren't riding in first class. About ten years ago, it was a toy, though not an SF toy, that led me to a vivid description of what an 1854 trip from New York to Chicago might have been like. My daughter had received the now discontinued Kirsten Larson American Girl doll for Christmas along with an introductory book called *Meet Kirsten* by Janet Beeler Shaw. The young Swedish immigrant's journey does not sound romantic: "Inside, the train was so hot it felt ready to explode. There was coal grit on the floor and cinders in the air. Kirsten could hardly get her breath. She saw that the windows had been nailed shut. The agent said the train would be safer this way." Although Kirsten, her mother, and younger brother find a seat on a hard wooden bench, her father and older brother stand all the way to Chicago.

We know life was hard during the industrial revolution. We've studied the era in school and heard about the difficulties from our relatives. Stricter workplace laws protect most of us from the conditions our grandparents and great-grandparents labored under. I'm thankful that unlike my not-so-distant ancestors, I wasn't chained to a machine in the paper mills as a tween or sent down into the coalmines as soon as I turned eight.

Authors Nisi Shawl and Charles Stross have both lobbed cogent criticism at the way some steampunk seems to

view history through rose-tinted goggles. While Charlie blasts the subgenre from his blog for everything from glutting the fiction market to celebrating totalitarianism and overlooking the exploitation of women and children, Nisi takes a more targeted approach. At *Tor.com*, she argues that the stories she's read have "Almost without exception . . . glorified British Victorian imperialism. They did this despite the fact that many of the cultural, scientific, and aesthetic elements steampunk celebrates had been appropriated from nations the British Empire conquered."

I recognize the tendency to gloss over the past is a factor in many types of historical fiction. Sometimes fiction makes historical eras seem as real as the world outside my front door. Other times the author's past really is a "foreign country"—one that bears no more resemblance to history than those confectionary Victorian houses under the Christmas tree ever resembled the average American home. There are times when I read to be entertained and times when I read for edification. Often I am edified even while being entertained. I've enjoyed stories that look unflinchingly at the issues Nisi raises and I've enjoyed stories set in a past of the author's creation that seemed almost entirely divorced from reality. The most rewarding of any of these tales never fail to teach me something about what it means to be human.

When I read fiction, I rarely think about whether the character or the author has an agenda. I avoid didactic prose at every opportunity. Yet the best stories are usually ones where real-life concerns have been subtly interwoven into the fabric of the tale. I'm sure authors will continue to borrow toys from steampunk to fashion marvelous dioramas for their train set. Nisi and Charlie offer great food for thought and for future stories. I'm looking forward to seeing to seeing new work from authors who push steampunk's boundaries by reflecting on these issues as well. ○

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## MORE ABOUT THE PLOT GENIE

ast issue's column was devoted to a discussion of the Plot Genie, an early twentieth-century gizmo with which writers struggling to generate story ideas could produce them by twirling a cardboard wheel and using the numbers that the wheel landed on to assemble plot components from a predesigned list. Its creator, a Hollywood screenwriter of the silent-film days named Wycliffe A. Hill, called it a "plot robot," but what it really is is a sort of primitive computer—no battery required—that uses stochastic methods to assemble information from random bits. By that I mean that the book that Wycliffe Hill published about eighty years ago (which included the vital cardboard wheel as an insert) first establishes what he called a "general formula for all types of stories," which has nine elements, listed by Hill as LOCALE OR ATMOSPHERE, FIRST CHARACTER, THE BELOVED, A PROBLEM, OBSTACLE TO LOVE, COMPLICATION, PREDICAMENT, THE CRISIS, and CLIMAX. The cardboard wheel has a small peephole in it. You turn the wheel and a number will become visible in the peephole. After three turns, you note down the number that appears, which will determine each of your nine necessary elements. These are catalogued numerically in the text of the book, and you have to hunt them down, number by number, to put your story outline together. The book provides long lists for each plot element: under "Backgrounds or locale" we are given "at the morgue," "in the swamp," "in court," "on a yacht," and 176 others. A list of 180 "usual male characters" offers us "spy," "diver," "guide," "judge," and so forth. "Unusual male characters," the next list, "gives us more exotic professions: "anarchist," "archduke," "wizard," "troubadour."

More spinning of the wheel and we fill

in our female character, our main plot problem ("relief from stigma opposed by lack of influence," for example), the obstacles to love, for love is what usually drives the plot ("beloved possessed with fatal ambition for revenge"), complications ("fatal ambition threatens to deprive loved one of health"), and onward through predicament and crisis to climax and resolution. It is a goofy way to construct a story, and some mighty goofy stories must have come from it, but evidently the Plot Genie had its followers, because my copy of the book, which dates from 1932, is the third edition. And in its cockeyed way it does impart to would-be fictioneers some useful knowledge of the basic building blocks of a story, not that I would really recommend your writing one about an archduke trapped in a swamp because his beloved is possessed with a fatal ambition for revenge.

Since writing the Plot Genie column, though, I've discovered that Hill's book was not even the first of its kind. It had a predecessor, *Plotto*, the work of William Wallace Cook (1867-1933), which deserves our attention not only because it, too, can teach one something of the logic of storytelling, but because its creator seems to have been a science fiction writer and may indeed have used his own system to create his books.

That invaluable work of reference, Everett F. Bleiler's *Checklist of Fantastic Literature*, tells us of six SF books by Cook published between 1903 and 1925. *A Round Trip to the Year 2000* (1903) depicts a future dystopia in which a sinister monopoly controls the supply of oxygen and work is done by seven-foot-tall robot slaves. (He calls them "muglugs," since the word "robot" had not yet been coined.) 1904's *The Blue Peter Troglodyte* brings an eight-foot-tall prehistoric man, found

preserved in a mine, back to life. *Marooned in 1492* (1905) is similar in theme to Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*, but apparently is a much less cheerful book. In *The Eighth Wonder* (1907), the earth's rotation is brought to a halt.

From the experience of writing these and other novels, Cook derived a basic structure for all fiction, which he set forth in his book *Plotto: The Master Book of All Plots*, published in 1928. A plot, he says, can be summarized in a sentence made up of just three clauses: "An initial Clause defining the protagonist in general terms, a middle Clause initiating and carrying on the action, and a final Clause . . . terminating the action." Nothing very surprising there; all he is really saying is that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Cook goes on to declare that all plots are driven by desire for one of the three kinds of happiness: happiness in love and courtship, in married life, or in enterprise. "All that is possible to a mortal craftsman," he observes sagely, "is the combining of old material into something new and different."

Cook next lets us know that these three motivations can be developed into just thirty-six master plots for fiction. (Robert A. Heinlein, many years later, boiled them down to just three, Boy Meets Girl, the Little Tailor, and the Man Who Learned Better, but that's a different story.) So far it all seems very easy to follow. But as Cook sets out to illustrate his three-clause system, his three great motivations, and his thirty-six master plots, he uncorks such a plethora of possible choices for generating stories that the task becomes bewildering.

First clause, for example, could give us "a male criminal." Clause Two, perhaps, is "seeking retaliation for a grievous wrong that is either real or fancied." Fine. Now to fill in some of the basic details. What kind of criminal? A bank robber? A kidnapper? A Mafia don? And what kind of grievous wrong has been done him? The perfidy of a trusted colleague? Betrayal by a promising protégé? The treachery of a lovely mistress? And then there is the

problem of choosing a scenario for the middle of the story. "Stricken with fever in a wilderness country," maybe? Does our Mafioso follow his enemy into the heart of darkness, then, tracking him—or her—to some Congo forest? Not bad. But whatever we choose must lead on to a satisfactory Clause Three: "Emerging happily from a serious entanglement," perhaps, or "foiling a guilty plotter and defeating a subtle plot."

Suddenly it all becomes less simple. We need detail, subplot, character shading, and we are offered plenty: "an important secret that called for decisive action," "an erring person committing a grievous mistake and seeking in secret to live down its evil results," "an object possessing mysterious powers," and more. Much more. Too much more. The possibilities become almost infinite. *Plotto* buries us under such a welter of choices that the diligent would-be writer, working through the maze of structural options, soon is wandering down some dead-end path or finds himself doubling back into impossible contradictions. As we pick this item and that to decorate our simple three-clause structure, we find ourselves lost in a thicket of interlocking alphanumeric categories drawn from his lists—B153 (A11 [B14] C22 [B31, A2-6], B66, C9, B41, B51 [C11]), etc., etc.—out of which, if we emerge, we have concocted a bizarre, incoherent surrealist epic made up of incompatible modules that are next to impossible to unite in the glowing fulfillment of "a final Clause . . . terminating the action."

Someone who has some skill at making leaps of inductive reasoning can probably draw the mishmash of plot fragments that *Plotto* provides into an actual story outline, although anyone who can do that could probably make up a story on his own without such arbitrary help—i.e., is actually a real writer. On the other hand, even real writers get stuck for story ideas sometimes, and the mechanical assistance of a gimmick like *Plotto* might just be able to spur the inception of a story by handing the writer a few oddball plot ele-

ments that his own imagination can go to work on. It did work for Cook, after all, and he even got some good SF ideas out of it a hundred years ago.

I used a method somewhat akin to that myself, once, when I needed a story idea and I had, for the moment, run absolutely dry. It was September, 1982, a warm and golden month, and I was exhausted after having spent the previous six months writing an immense historical novel, *Lord of Darkness*. But now *Omni* magazine wanted to do a special Robert Silverberg issue, containing reprints of two of my earlier stories plus a brand-new piece to top everything off. It was too flattering an offer to refuse. But where was I going to get that brand-new story? I was wiped out. I had reached that point, so dreadfully familiar to any author who has just finished a major project, where I felt convinced that I'd never have a story idea again.

One tactic writers sometimes try when stuck for an idea is to grab two unrelated concepts at random, jam them together, and see if they strike any sparks. I tried it. I picked up the day's newspaper and glanced quickly at two different pages.

The most interesting words that rose to my eye were "computers" and "angels." All right. I had my story then and there. Geek uses his computer to talk to angels.

Corny? No. Nothing's corny if handled the right way. Trust me. The story that emerged, "Basileus," has been reprinted in many anthologies, including the Science Fiction Writers of America's *Fantasy Hall of Fame*.

The drawbacks of *Plotto* led to Wycliffe Hill's improved model, which uses a version of Cook's plot categories but adds the cardboard wheel to the mix so that the job of choosing the categories to use becomes far less confusing, though rather more arbitrary. The numbers turning up on the wheel, rather than the writer's own sense of an appropriate choice of elements, determine the structure of the story. Intuitive selection is replaced by mechanistic determination.

Has either book ever resulted in the construction of a short story that some magazine was willing to publish? I have no idea. But there probably are hundreds or even thousands of would-be science fiction writers among the readers of this column, and I suggest to them that they make the experiment. Just yesterday I saw that copies of *Plotto* and *The Plot Genie* are being sold on the Internet at about \$125 each. Pick one up, follow the instructions, write your story. You might just find that a grand literary career is unfolding for you in a wondrous, magical way. ○

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# THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

## CELEBRATING ISAAC

James Gunn

*On October 26 I gave a talk about Isaac Asimov at West Virginia University in Morgantown. The occasion was part of a continuing lecture series called "A Celebration of Ideas," and the WVU library and the university's Chief of Staff Jay Cole and his marvelous student assistant Molly Simis came up with the happy idea of featuring a talk about Isaac, in large part because the library's special collections have what probably is the largest collection of Asimov materials after that held by Boston University.*

*How WVU got the Asimov collection is a story in itself: a WVU alumnus, Larry Shaver, now living in Oklahoma City had been collecting Asimov books and other materials since his college days. He offered his collection to WVU, and the library had the wisdom to accept them. Later Carlos Patterson of Sacramento, California, not an alumnus, heard about the collection and added several hundred items from his Asimov collection; the WVU collection now has almost seven hundred items, including games and quizzes with Isaac's name on them. Both donors flew in to Morgantown for the occasion.*

*Here are the remarks I made to an enthusiastic audience of 180 (mostly) Asimov fans in a big room at the WVU student center.*

I am pleased to talk about my friend and literary model, Isaac Asimov, in this, the year he would have been ninety—or maybe ninety-one. As nearly as his parents could calculate, he was born on January 2, 1920, but that was in Petrovichi, Russia, where records and memories are unclear, and he may have been born as early as October 4. He would have been astonished at the idea of this kind of celebration; when I interviewed him for my book about his

science fiction, he said that I should be writing my own fiction.

Isaac was brought to this country at the age of three and grew up in a series of Brooklyn candy stores. That, he felt, shaped his later life. He did not regret the habits they instilled in him—with the possible exception of the social awkwardness created by never visiting anyone or having anyone visit the family, tied as they were to the unrelenting demands of the store—because they resulted in the adult, successful Isaac Asimov. And that was a very good thing to be.

He found ways to cope with the larger world, at first with wit bordering on the smart-alecky and later with what he called "gallantry to the ladies," which consisted of suggestive remarks offered as jests, and an overall air of amazement at his own success coupled with a generous accounting of his own failings and the putdowns by his friends. In his school days, for instance, he recounted the occasion when Leigh Hunt's "Abou Ben Adhem" was scheduled for discussion. Ben Adhem, whose name is not in the angel's tablet as one who loves the lord, asks to be written as one who loves his fellow man, and the poem ends with "And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest." Isaac was ready for the teacher's question: "Why did Ben Adhem's name lead all the rest?" "Alphabetical order, sir!" Isaac volunteered. He was sent to the principal, Isaac recounted, "but it was worth it."

Isaac credited his transformation from annoying know-it-all to genial comrade to an incident late in World War II, when he had been inducted into the Army and sent to H-bomb tests in the Pacific. He heard a soldier telling a couple of others about how the bomb worked. He rose to assume the smart man's burden and offer the correct account when he asked him-

self who appointed him their educator, and sat down. Ironically, a few years later he assumed the smart man's burden by beginning a series of non-fiction books about almost everything that we celebrate today, that led Professor George G. Simpson of Harvard to call him "one of our natural wonders and national resources."

Before Isaac was a celebrated sage, however, he was a science fiction writer, and even in his latter days he wanted to be known as a science fiction writer. "It is uphill to science fiction; downhill to everything else," he commented. He wrote about attending a *World Book* meeting of contributors where each was introduced with an orchestral theme. To Isaac's chagrin, he was introduced with "How deep is the ocean, how high is the sky?" "No matter how various the subject matter I wrote on," he said, "I was a science fiction writer first and it is as a science fiction writer that I want to be identified."

In the introduction to *Nebula Award Stories Eight*, he wrote:

I began by writing science fiction . . . and for thirty years I've found that my training in science fiction made it possible for me to write anything. . . . I have written about 150 books as of now, and I tell you, that of all the things I write, science fiction is by far the hardest thing I do.

Isaac fell in love with science fiction in his father's candy store, which stocked newspapers and magazines. Isaac learned to read them so carefully that they could be returned looking untouched—a habit that he retained until the end of his life. Among those magazines was a new kind of publication that had started when Isaac was six years old: *Amazing Stories*, then *Science Wonder Stories* and *Astounding Stories of Super Science*. Isaac had taught himself to read at the age of five, and Isaac's father always viewed his son with a sense of awe and a determination that his elder son would be a doctor. He ordered Isaac not to waste his time on such pulp magazines until Isaac pointed out the word "science" in the magazine's title.

Isaac's father gave him a used office-sized typewriter when Isaac was fifteen, and Isaac put it to use immediately, writing letters to the science fiction magazines commenting on the stories, particularly those in *Astounding Stories*, which had recently been acquired by Street & Smith from the bankrupt Clayton magazine chain. His fascination was intensified when John W. Campbell, Jr., was named editor of the magazine in 1937 and changed the name to *Astounding Science-Fiction*. Isaac decided then to start writing science fiction stories, and, more importantly, to write them for *Astounding*.

Soon afterward Isaac discovered that the magazine was edited in Manhattan, a subway ride away, and Isaac ventured in to meet Campbell. It was the first of a series of meetings that would shape Isaac's developing mind and future. Campbell was patient and provocative about science, culture, and writing, and he was willing to talk by the hour to the inexperienced teenager, even reading the stories Isaac began bringing to him and pointing out their flaws while he rejected them. The first story Isaac published, "Marooned Off Vesta," when he was nineteen, was in *Amazing Stories* and the second as well, but he counted the real beginning of his career from the story "Trends" that he published in *Astounding* a couple of months later.

That began a remarkable collaboration of editor and author that lasted ten years. That collaboration included Isaac's robot stories, his Foundation stories, and his non-series stories, among which was, in 1942, his first story featured on the cover, "Nightfall." Although he didn't know it, this publication would establish his reputation as a major writer. The story illustrated the way in which the editor and the author worked together. Isaac had come to Campbell's office on one of his frequent visits, and Campbell quoted a sentence from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*: "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the re-

membrane of the city of God." And Campbell said, "What do you think would happen, Asimov, if men were to see the stars for the first time in a thousand years?" "I don't know," Isaac said, and Campbell replied. "I think they would go mad. I want you to write a story about that."

The incident brings up a question about Isaac's writing style. Style, Todorov wrote, is what stands between the reader and the text, and Isaac wanted nothing to stand in the way. One of the first scholars writing about Isaac's work, Joe Patrouch, commented that Isaac could write poetically when he wished and cited a paragraph near the end of "Nightfall." Isaac replied that transparency was a style, and that paragraph didn't prove that he could write poetically, since it had been inserted by Campbell and made no logical sense in the context of the story. But he never removed the paragraph from later reprints. He also resented readers telling him that "Nightfall" was his best story and suggesting that he write more stories like that; he felt that he had learned a good deal about writing since he was twenty-two. But when he incorporated himself, he did so under the name of "Nightfall, Inc." Isaac had no fears of irony.

Meanwhile he had joined a fan group called the Futurians, one of many chartered by Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories*. The Futurians included Fred Pohl, Donald Wollheim, Cyril Kornbluth, Richard Wilson, James Blish, Robert Lowndes, Damon Knight, Judith Merril, and Virginia Kidd—fans who would help shape science fiction for the next few decades as writers, editors, agents, and even publishers. Isaac continued his education into college, not always happily as he discovered that he could not get admitted to the right college (he was admitted to Columbia's Seth Junior College and then to Columbia University rather than Columbia College), that the wonder child who had skipped several grades was not as good as some of his classmates at some subjects, and that he disliked anatomy and dissection.

He also discovered that he could not get into medical school and decided to study chemistry toward a graduate degree, interrupted by a period of military research at the U.S. Navy Yard in Philadelphia with Robert Heinlein and L. Sprague de Camp. All this time Isaac was writing and selling stories regularly to Campbell. As a writer who had experienced financial struggles myself, I was surprised—and, to be honest, somewhat bemused—to read in Isaac's autobiography that he had earned a total of \$7,821.75 in his first eleven years, or about \$710 a year.

Isaac earned his Ph.D. in 1948 and, after a year of post-doctoral research at Columbia, was hired as an instructor in biochemistry at the Boston University School of Medicine. That was the year he wrote his first novel, *Grow Old With Me*, which Doubleday published as *Pebble in the Sky* in 1950. The same year a fan publisher, Gnome Press, collected his first robot stories as *I, Robot* and followed that with his *Foundation* books, all eventually taken over by Doubleday. It was the beginning of a relationship with Doubleday that lasted until his death, reaching its high point with *The Caves of Steel* in 1954 and its sequel *The Naked Sun* in 1957.

Meanwhile Isaac had turned to non-fiction at Boston University, publishing his first scientific book, *Biochemistry and Human Metabolism* in 1952 and progressing to his first solo text *The Chemistry of Life*. He had been approached to write a book about science for teenagers. His career as a writer was taking off in surprising ways. He had earned \$1,695 for his writing in 1949, more than \$4,700 in 1950, \$3,625 in 1951, and an astonishing \$8,550 in 1952. The last was half again as large as his university salary, now \$5,500.

By 1957, Isaac realized that he was primarily a writer. A new dean asked him to devote more of his time to research. "My writing is my research," he insisted, but the dean persisted, and Isaac was forced to resign everything except his title—by that time he was a tenured associate pro-

fessor—and turn to full-time writing. Unfortunately for science fiction, he decided to devote his time to non-fiction. He attributed that decision to the launching of Sputnik, the first satellite, by the Soviets and the need for a greater emphasis on scientific education, but his non-fiction was a lot easier to write, more publishers were eager for it, and they paid better. He wrote short stories with some regularity, but he did not write another science fiction novel for fifteen years.

Isaac was so prolific as a non-fiction author that it is impossible to describe even a small proportion of his production. His fiction listing covers two pages in the compilation that accompanied every autobiographical work. His anthologies—it should be admitted that Isaac delighted in the number of works he had published, and toward the end of his career he padded the list with dozens of anthologies he edited with Martin H. Greenberg, the all-time champion of anthologists—covered nearly three pages. But his non-fiction covered more than five pages.

They are best described by categories, which helps, as well, to illustrate the astonishing scope of his interests. General science—typified by his *Intelligent Man's Guide to Science*—totaled twenty-four books. Mathematics was a measly seven. Astronomy—clearly a favorite—reached sixty-eight; earth sciences, eleven; chemistry and biochemistry, sixteen; physics, twenty-two; biology, seventeen; history, nineteen; the Bible, nine; literature, ten; humor and satire—including *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man* that got Isaac an appearance on the "Tonight" show—nine; science essay collections mostly from the monthly articles he wrote for *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, forty; science fiction essay collections from the editorials he wrote for *Isaac Asimov's Magazine*, two; autobiography, three; and miscellaneous, fourteen. In all, 470 books, a record about which he was inordinately proud and one that may never be surpassed.

His science books represented a significant contribution to a general awaken-

ing of the American public to the need for greater understanding of science if the U.S. was going to maintain its leadership in the world. In 1973 he pointed out that we were living in a science fiction world, a world of spaceships, atomic energy, and computers, a world very much like the world that he and other science fiction writers had been describing a quarter-century before. It was a world typified by the first moon landing, four years before. "Science fiction writers and readers didn't put a man on the moon all by themselves," he told me, "but they created a climate of opinion in which the goal of putting a man on the moon became acceptable."

In *I, Asimov* he described his prolificacy. Once he turned to writing full-time, he averaged thirteen books a year, and his books ranged over nearly every division of the Dewey decimal system. During a question-and-answer period a man asked, "If you had to choose between writing and women, Dr. Asimov, which would you choose?" And Isaac answered instantly, "Well, I can type for twelve hours without getting tired." And Barbara Walters asked him, off camera, "What if the doctor gave you six months to live. What would you do?" "Type faster," Isaac said.

Tackling as many topics as he did, Isaac depended upon information he could dig up. "What I contribute to my books," he wrote in his autobiography, "are (1) ease and clarity of style, (2) sensible and logical order of presentation, and (3) apt and original metaphors, analogies, and conclusions."

Several moments in this remarkable record of productivity stand out for me. One was when I filmed a part of my Literature of Science Fiction series with Isaac in 1973. When Isaac learned that I shared an office with Prof. Paul Kendall, a renowned Shakespearean scholar, he gave me one of his own Shakespeare books to take back with me. I wondered how Paul would respond, but clearly he was pleased.

On another occasion Isaac was invited to be part of a panel discussing the hu-

man brain at a meeting in Washington, D.C. He responded that he didn't know anything about the human brain. The inviter came back by saying, "You must be an expert. You've just written a book about it." And Isaac said, "I'm an expert at sounding like an expert."

That was what Isaac did best: he sounded like an expert. He had a marvelous memory. In his childhood he would read all his school books the first couple of days and then never open them again. I asked him once about his memory and if he ever wondered how other people's memories worked, and he said that in a meeting of Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiasts he was reciting some lyrics and for a moment couldn't think of the next line. That was when he realized what many people, not blessed with his recall, experienced all the time. But even Isaac's memory was not infallible. He began including autobiographical notes when he took on the editing of the Hugo volumes and continued it into his own story collections. But when he wrote his enormous autobiography, to mark the milestone of his two hundredth published book, he referred to the diaries that he had been updating every day since 1938 and discovered that he had to correct some of his earlier recollections. He had published *Opus 100* with Houghton Mifflin to mark his first hundred books, and he thought it only fair to allow them to publish *Opus 200*. But Doubleday was his first and still his major publisher, so Doubleday asked him to let it publish his autobiography. He protested that he had never done anything, but Doubleday insisted. A year later he brought in a thick stack of manuscript and put it on the editor's table. When the editor didn't flinch, he went into the hall and returned with another stack just as thick. The editor said, "What would you have written, Isaac, if you had ever done anything?" Isaac could make even a life of reading and writing a fascinating account.

To his memory, he added a good knowledge of where to find the information he needed, and he developed the

ability to translate that information into narratives as readable and dramatic as fiction. He could make the difficult seem simple. In the book I wrote about him, I suggested that his fiction got its characteristic Asimovian flavor from the fact that it was written like science, and his non-fiction got its readability from the fact that it was written like fiction. His science fiction also was distinguished by its rationality. When I wrote about him in *The Road to Science Fiction*, I titled the section "The Cool, Clear Voice of Asimov." His heroes were the most rational and had the longest view, like Hari Seldon, whose psychohistorical plans were intended to shorten twenty-five thousand years of barbarism to a thousand. His villains weren't villains but rational people whose vision was too limited. And emotional responses were frustrations of the need to behave rationally.

That is why two of his personal favorites are anomalies. His favorite story was "The Last Question," which is cool and rational, but his second and third favorites were "The Bicentennial Man" and "The Ugly Little Boy," which were emotional and irrational—what I have called "Un-Asimovian"—though, of course, so effective as fiction that one was made into a film and the other has been optioned. Isaac called their creation "writing over his head," like the middle section of *The Gods Themselves*.

Another difference between Isaac's fiction and his non-fiction was that his fiction was always optimistic: solutions would be found, rationality would prevail. But Isaac's non-fiction, when it addressed the many problems that faced the world, like pollution or overpopulation or war, was pessimistic. It was a matter, he said, of dealing with the world as it is—"the world in which irrationality is predominant," and he told me, "I am trying to live a life of reason in an emotional world."

In 1970 he wrote in a letter: "I wish I could say I was optimistic about the human race. I love us all, but we are so stupid and shortsighted that I wonder if we

can lift our eyes to the world about us long enough not to commit suicide. I keep trying to make people do so."

But the year before he wrote: "In considering the future society, let us assume that (1) there will be no nuclear war; (2) the population will increase but not disastrously; and (3) the trend toward automation will continue." He followed that by some predictions about work becoming more administrative and managerial, which would accelerate the trend toward sexual equality; and that the increased amount of leisure would provide a great emphasis on creativity and the purveying of amusement. "I suspect," he concluded, "that in the twenty-first century, one third of the human race will be engaged . . . in supplying amusement for the other two-thirds."

Isaac's love for writing made him a difficult husband and, sometimes, a detached father. When he received copies of his forty-first book from Houghton Mifflin, he mentioned to his wife the possibility of reaching a hundred books before he died. She shook her head and said, "What good will it be if you then regret having spent your life writing books while all the essence of life passes you by?" And Isaac replied, "But for me the essence of life is writing. In fact, if I do manage to publish a hundred books, and if I then die, my last words are likely to be, 'Only a hundred!'" On another occasion his beloved daughter Robyn asked him to suppose he had to choose between her and writing. Isaac recalled he said, "Why, I would choose you, dear." And he added, "But I hesitated—and she noticed that, too."

Isaac did return to writing science fiction novels, with a novelization of *Fantastic Voyage* in 1966 and *The Gods Themselves* in 1972. He is ranked among hard science fiction writers, which means that the fiction is based on real science or on new developments in science, but he was not the hard science fiction writer that Hal Clement was, or Larry Niven; Isaac's fiction was more philosophical, based on concepts like psychohistory or robotics or the musings

of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also was fond of history, and the Foundation stories are the fall of the Roman empire writ large. *The Gods Themselves*, however, showed that Isaac could do hard science fiction when he wished; it began with the challenge of writing a novella about the impossibility of plutonium-186.

In 1982, Isaac returned to his Foundation roots and wrote *Foundation's Edge*. His Doubleday editors insisted on it. Betty Prashker called him into her office and said, "Isaac, we want you to write a novel for us." Isaac protested that he didn't write novels any more, but Prashker said they were going to send him a contract with a large advance; that frightened Isaac, who always signed for a small advance that allowed him the freedom to write what he wanted rather than what the publisher wanted. That evening Doubleday editor Pat LoBrutto called to say that when Betty said "a novel," she meant "a science fiction novel," and when Doubleday said "a science fiction novel" they meant "a Foundation novel."

I can't help mentioning that *Foundation's Edge* was not only Isaac's triumph—it was his first best-seller but not the last—it was mine as well. The greatest tribute a scholar can have is when his scholarship has a positive impact on his subject, and Isaac wrote that my book, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* had made *Foundation's Edge* possible.

He wrote:

I was on the edge of deciding it was all a terrible mistake and of insisting on giving back the money when (quite by accident, I swear) I came across some sentences by science fiction writer and critic James Gunn, who in connection with the Foundation series said, "Action and romance have little to do with the success of the Trilogy—virtually all the action takes place offstage, and the romance is invisible—but the stories provide a detective-story fascination with the permutations and reversals of ideas."

Oh well, if what was needed were "permutations and reversals of ideas," then that I could supply. Panic receded, and on June 10, 1981, I dug out the fourteen pages I had written more than eight years before. . . .

Let me conclude with my two favorite anecdotes about Isaac. Early in 1956, Isaac wrote me that he had just written a pornographic scene that the postmaster couldn't touch. (This, of course, was more than fifty years ago when the postmaster general was still declaring books obscene and refusing to allow them to be mailed.) It wasn't until I read *The Naked Sun* the following year that I knew what he meant. In that novel, Lije Baley, his agoraphobic detective of *The Caves of Steel*, is called to Solaria to solve an important murder case. Solaria has been settled by Spacers, who restrict their numbers to twenty thousand while the robot population has increased to twenty-five million. Solarians have become claustrophobic and neurotically afraid of personal contact, but as Lije is completing his mission and saying goodbye to Gladia, the victim's widow, she strips off her glove and touches his cheek. It is, in the circumstances, truly pornographic.

Finally, Isaac was stubbornly attached to his name, even though he was warned that it might cause him to suffer from prejudice and his stories to be rejected. When he was five, he remembered, his mother considered changing his first name to Irving, but he wailed in protest that he would never answer to any name but Isaac. Later, because his name had already appeared in print, John Campbell never asked him to use a pseudonym, as Campbell had sometimes done with other writers. His last name was not always easy for readers to spell or remember, and when it appeared in the letter columns as Azimov (with a "z" instead of an "s") he was quick with a correction. So it happened that when he received his much coveted Grand Master Award in 1987, I approached to inspect the award and congratulate him. His name had been misspelled "Issac Asmi-

mov." "Isaac," I said, "are you going to give it back?" "Not on your life," he replied.

Isaac had triple bypass surgery in 1983 and was hospitalized in 1990 for a kidney infection and in 1991 for heart and kidney failure. He died April 6, 1992. He had often expressed the hope of dying with his nose caught between two typewriter keys, but at the end he had lost the strength to write and that, for him, may have been almost worse. He had already written a couple of inscriptions for his epitaph. One of them said, "It's not dying I mind. It's having to stop writing," and the other, "Wait, I'm not finished!"

In the epilogue to *Forward the Foundation*, his widow Janet noted that writing his last Foundation novel was hard on Isaac, "because in killing Hari Seldon he was also killing himself. . . ." The first paragraph of that novel ends "It has been said that Hari Seldon left this life as he lived it, for he died with the future he created unfolding all around him. . . ."

That could have been written about Isaac himself. O

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**Afterword:** Janet Asimov revealed in an epilogue to Isaac's posthumous autobiographical *It's Been a Good Life* that Isaac had died of AIDS contracted from blood transfusions during open-heart surgery a decade earlier, a fact that she had been persuaded to conceal at the time of Isaac's death.

**James Gunn**, emeritus professor of English at the University of Kansas, wrote *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* (which won a Hugo Award) and is the author or editor of forty other books, including *The Immortals*, *The Listeners*, *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, and the six-volume *Road to Science Fiction* anthology. He has served as president of both the Science Fiction Writers of America and the Science Fiction Research Association and he received a Damon Knight Grand Master award in 2007.

# Religion is Canceled

Roll up the altars, the vacuum of divinity  
is announced: an emptiness of Heavens,  
whether by design or abandonment the only  
uncertainty. The stars are unfolding  
lacking compassion in all spectra  
while the universe's own creations are left  
to perish without remembrance  
except as elemental seeds.

The mightiest supernova no longer  
carries judgment, scales balance to entropy.

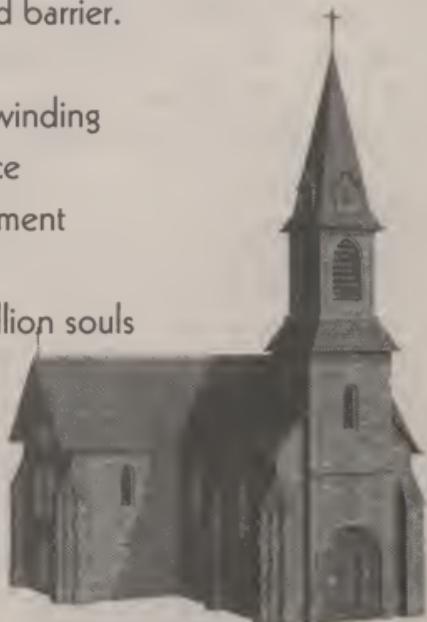
A singularity is not watchful,  
superstrings shall never intervene.

Those sending prayers upward must know  
their words will now travel through no metaphysical means,  
delivered without breaking the sound barrier.

Start the atomic time clock—the unwinding  
of all things shall ultimately commence  
as previously scheduled. This experiment  
will be ongoing until then.

Brace for arguments from the multibillion souls  
decrying the belief that our universe  
is not mostly empty.

—Danny Adams



# THE DAY THE WIRES CAME DOWN

Alexander Jablokov

Alexander Jablokov's latest novel, *Brain Thief*, has just been released in paperback by Tor Books. He tells us that his evocative new cover story owes its long gestation to the Cambridge Science Fiction Workshop, the Rio Hondo writer's workshop, and Kelly Link and Gavin Grant, among others. The story is part of a possible set, involving various odd forms of transportation. If there is interest, he may write more of them. He tells us, "the original inspiration for the story was, a dream I had in my teens, which has stuck with me, of transport cables running through the upper levels of an ancient city."

Mother had gone home with a mechanical device for chopping tree roots out of drainage pipes and left her offspring to their mission. Arabella should have been getting home herself, to prepare for her going-away party, but instead she persuaded her mother that Andrew couldn't handle finding Father an appropriate birthday present on his own. Mother had agreed, though reluctantly. As her children had reached their mid-teens, she had begun to feel that each was safer out alone than when they were together.

"I think the lighting section is up here," Arabella said.

"Will they have something appropriate?" Andrew dragged behind as they climbed the stairs to the store's upper departments. "They're kind of staid here, you know. Father never shops here when it's his choice."

"We should at least look," Arabella said.

"I was thinking something kind of technical." Andrew, annoyed at not coming up with the idea, tried to make up for it by over-specifying the gift itself. "Brass, gim-

baled, and with a Fresnel lens. I mean, it should look good even when it's not on, right? It should look serious."

She let him prattle. Despite the skylight, Father's study had a lot of oddly dark corners. He sometimes complained when some old map or fossil was too hard to examine where it was, and had to be hauled over to the big display desk. A well-made task lamp was just the thing.

She could think of him using it while she was away.

But when they got up there, they found the lighting section in darkness, its shelves empty and cordoned off. Arabella stumbled over a length of dropped conduit, and Andrew steadied her by the elbow. She shook his hand off.

"Did you know it was closed before we came up here?" she said.

"No! Really, Arabella. The light is a great idea. But if we can't do it here . . ." He looked further up the stairs. "There's something else we can do."

He'd known the lighting section was closed, but had wanted her to get so interested in buying Father a light that she would go along with whatever ridiculous plan he'd come up with. It was a constant battle, what came from being born within fifteen minutes of someone else but still being completely different from him.

"What else?" she said.

"You'll see. Up, up."

She would have liked to refuse, just to bug him. But she didn't want to think about Father squinting to get his work done, maybe resenting her for having left him in the dark, after she was gone.

So she followed Andrew up the stairs. They grew narrower, the displays less elaborate. She caught glimpses of wire bailers and displays of burlap swatches. The windows that lit the stairs were thick with dust, with dead flies on their sills. The light that made it through was a heavy yellow, as if she was nostalgically remembering this climb even as they were making it.

She felt the rumble of heavy wheels above. Their constant vibration had cracked the plaster walls.

"Is that still running?" Pretending ignorance was a cheap way to annoy Andrew, but it was all she could come up with quickly.

"This is the last day for the lines! You mean you didn't—"

"Then we better hurry." Arabella was running up the stairs on "hurry," and it took him a second to catch on. Then he was pounding after her. Andrew was big, and kind of clumsy, thickly blond to Arabella's whiplike darkness. But he was surprisingly fast. She needed every second of her head start. They hit the last door together and, each claiming victory, tumbled into the telpher station on the department store's roof.

The tongue-and-groove walls had been painted over many times, by ever cheaper and thicker paints. Arabella could see traces of pink, blue, and chartreuse peeking through the gun-metal gray. Most of the decorative tiles had fallen off the double barrel vault overhead, leaving white dots of cement.

The ticket kiosk still had its brass cage and its fancy cupola, and the safety barrier still looked like an altar rail, though most of the wooden icicles between the balusters had been kicked out. A notice of the telpher station's closing had fallen from the kiosk and lay on the floor, marked with dark footprints.

Overhead, a horizontal metal wheel rotated slowly. It pulled a cable in, and then fed it back out, like a pulley. These moving telpher cables crisscrossed the city, pulling light wooden cars filled with passengers from rooftop to rooftop. The car they were waiting for would be coming from the office building there, where there was another telpher station. The moving transport cables dipped down, then rose back up toward it, each matched with a heavy static cable to support the weight of the car, making four in all.

And there was the incoming car as it swung out from the office building station and dropped down on its pair of cables. The overhead wheel that pulled its cable gave an occasional low groan from its poorly lubricated bearings. The car dropped to its lowest point, then started climbing back up to them, like a spider making its way across its web. The arm it hung from curved up and over the cables and rested on them like curled fingers, its support wheels running on the static cable while its grip held the transport cable and pulled it along.

Then it was suddenly there. The cable grip squealed as the telpherman released the inbound moving cable. The car bumped past the wheel into the station. Its support wheels rolled off the static support cable onto the thicker rail in the station. It hung there while its doors flipped open and passengers got on and off, Arabella and Andrew among them.

The telpherman, a young man with dark hair, sat behind and above his passengers. It was his last day on the job, but he showed no signs of sadness, peering down at the passengers as he always did, to make sure no one would get trapped by a door and yanked into the sky on the outside of the car. For a moment, he looked familiar to Arabella, though a further glance at him didn't bring the memory into focus. She followed Andrew onto the wooden slats of the passenger bench.

Once everyone was safely in, the doors closed, and he released the brake, letting the car slide down the inclined rail and bump past the next return wheel so that he could grab on to the next transport cable with his grip. With a silent swiftness, they were pulled out of the station. Autumn sunlight filled the car.

They crossed above a wide street crowded with streetcars and pedestrians. They brushed past a cupola and caught a glimpse of a private office, filled with dress forms and mannequins, and the back of a man's bald head as he knelt to pin a hem. The cupola was surrounded by caryatids, arms up as if expressing astonishment, not supporting the green copper roof. They wore brassieres over their Greek chitons: a display of this year's models. Andrew had his face pressed to the glass.

"They'll probably stop putting those up when the telpher stops running," Arabella said. "Who'll see them?"

"It's a crime," he muttered.

Arabella glanced over her shoulder at the telpherman. Dark eyes too, and a strong jaw. Maybe the telpher lines hired for a look, and she'd just seen people who looked like him before.

"Why are the telpher lines getting closed down, anyway?" she said.

"Too fun." Andrew sighed. "Gets us to too many places someone prefers to keep people out of. Subversive of public peace. Who knows? Like always, they say it's money. Cost. That's how they explain any decision they've already made."

The line lifted and came into a larger station with glass canopies and elaborate wrought-iron work. Unlike the simple return wheels of the department store station, these wheels were powered drive wheels, and the vibration of the engine could be felt as soon as they stopped.

At a gesture from Andrew they stepped out. From here the department store they had left was a vague gray bulk on the other side of the main shopping district. The advertising banners on its side, fluttering in the breeze, were unreadable.

This was some kind of terminal stop, because everyone got out. The car rattled onto a switch, released on moving transport cable, rolled a few feet down a support rail, grabbed on to another cable, and, empty, zipped off in some secret direction, along with its driver.

"All right," Arabella said. "What's here?"

"Lights," Andrew said. "Lots of other stuff too. We should be able to find the perfect thing."

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The store should have been quiet and organized, but instead it was in chaos, with cabinets open and their contents strewn about. Several people sat on the floor, crumpling sheets of newspaper and stuffing them into boxes.

A young woman with a long skirt, and her hair tucked under a kerchief to keep the dust off, shrugged at Andrew's question. "We packed those things up . . . when? Greg?" Someone answered, though Arabella couldn't hear the words. "A week ago. Fragile. We couldn't wait."

"But why, Jill?" Andrew said. "Why are you leaving here?"

"When the lines go down, where are our customers going to come from? There's a freight elevator way down the hall, but it's a hike just from there. We have to move. Don't worry, we'll tell all our loyal customers where we went. We'll have a big party. Tell you what, I'll put those lights on sale for you."

"But that will be too late." Andrew was in despair.

"Take a look around. Maybe something else will catch your fancy. Now, if you'll excuse me. . ." Arabella expected her to deal with some packing crisis, but instead Jill paused, head cocked, listening for something, before moving off. Arabella got the impression Andrew was used to getting more attention from this woman. He sometimes came home with battered ancient objects. Now she knew where at least some of them had come from.

Andrew stood, at a loss.

"If there's nothing here, there's nothing here," Arabella said.

"You're in a hurry to get home." Andrew sounded resentful. "Planning your party. There's a lot to do."

Arabella did, in fact, have a lot to do. She was nowhere near as up on her packing as she should have been. The busy efficiency of this store put her to shame. This Jill could probably have everything in Arabella's room done in under fifteen minutes.

But she was desperate not to get back. Her train to the mountains left early the next morning. She couldn't alter that, but she could make sure she didn't waste the short time she had left here in the city that was the only home she knew. The quick failure of Andrew's plan was a real disappointment, because it meant that their house was the only place left to go.

"Isn't there anywhere else we can go?" she said. "Anyplace else with a light for sale?"

Andrew shook his head.

"Hey, Andrew!" It was Jill, holding something wrapped in a sheet of old newsprint. "I found this buried in back, under some fossils. If you want it, you can have it."

She unrolled the newspaper to reveal a dark metallic cylinder, maybe a foot long and a couple of inches in diameter. It could have been a club, or the handle to a tool, though it looked too fragile to be either.

From his face, Arabella could see that Andrew was wondering whether to pretend he knew what it was.

Jill saved him the trouble. "An arc-light electrode. A rare one, too—magnetite-titanium. I have no idea where it even came from."

"But . . . there must be a lot more to an arc light. Where's the rest?"

"No idea! If you want it, take it. I've given you all the information I have on it. Examine everything about it carefully, and you might learn something." Jill paused again. This time she did hear something, some change in the thumping and vibration of the telpher station overhead. "Otherwise dump it near the back door. Just come to the new store when you can and make a real purchase."

This time she moved with quick purpose, to the stairs and out of the store.

Arabella now saw that the newspaper held a full-page engraving, something with

the shattered beams of something collapsed and people fighting on the ruins. Andrew wrapped the cylinder back up before she could get a better look. What else could he do but keep it?

He looked around. "There must be something else we could pick up. . . ."

"No, Andrew."

They were only fifteen minutes apart in age—their parents had never revealed which of them had emerged first—but he knew when to accept her authority.

Up on the platform that same dark-haired telpherman, his boots gleaming, had hauled out an older car, lacquered a dignified red. It hung from the support rail as he fussed with its grip. It looked enticing, but this car was heading on, away from the department store and home. There was a lot to do at home, and Arabella was desperate to avoid all of it.

Arabella could see that Jill had been listening for just this car. She stood in the sun at the edge of the platform, picking tiny pieces of parchment and rotted leather from her jacket. She'd pulled her kerchief off, to reveal light brown hair, held in two thick braids pinned around her head.

"Departing in five minutes!" the telpherman called. Passengers who had gotten up from their seats on the platform settled themselves back. Even in its heyday, patience and a willingness to accept the unexpected had been a requirement of telpher passengers.

The telpherman jumped energetically off his car and strode over to Jill. They leaned on the railing next to each other, looking out over the cityscape. It was too far to hear anything, and there was really no way to get closer without being obvious, so Arabella found a way to distract herself.

"Let me see that electrode."

"It won't look any different."

"Just let me see it."

With ill grace, Andrew handed it to her, and she unwrapped it. She wasn't interested in the electrode, but in the newspaper engraving that Andrew had so cavalierly ignored. She thought Jill had been quite clear that there was more information to be found there. Andrew might have known Jill better, but Arabella was sure she understood her better.

The engraving on the sheet showed a collapsed telpher station, shrouded in mist. You could see iron wheels and snapped cables. Above it loomed a wall made of heavy stone blocks. The artist had lavished a lot of attention on every shattered board and twisted piece of metal.

"The Fall of Carcery Station," was the title.

Around the picture of the collapsed station were five little scenes, in ovals:

A scene of the same station in darkness, with men in evening wear fighting on it, their shadows black and sharp-cast behind them by some great light.

A telpher drive wheel and steam engine wreathed in smoke and steam.

A party or ballroom with a lot of elegantly dressed people standing and looking out of a window at something, their shadows also black and long, though not as crisp as those of the others fighting on the struts.

A bearded man falling back in the mist that often swirled in low-lying Carcery Square, one arm outstretched, the other on his forehead as a strut or a bar fell from somewhere above.

And at the top, an elegantly dressed young woman operating a large searchlight, pulling back on it hard, one foot up on its high heel.

\* \* \*

The engraving was beautiful. But why was that woman with the light wearing a ball gown? It seemed an inappropriate outfit for what looked like hard work.

"Is this your light, here?" Arabella pointed to the young woman.

"What? Where?" Andrew turned his attention to the sheet. Then he spent quite a few minutes looking at it, grunting to himself, so Arabella glanced over at Jill and the telpherman.

Jill sat on a bench, arms crossed. The telpherman had vanished.

But where had he gone? He certainly hadn't come back by them, and his car still hung locked to the overhead rail, while the increasingly impatient passengers paced back and forth.

Jill looked up as the telpherman clambered down from above, holding a bucket. Bird feathers stuck to his jacket, and a couple floated to the ground. She looked like she'd like to brush a few more off, but instead glanced into the bucket and then turned away, irritated by what she saw there.

"This must be from the night it happened!" Andrew gestured with the electrode, and a vagrant puff of breeze blew the newspaper off his lap.

It skittered toward the railing. But the telpherman, quick and lithe, was on it in an instant. He folded it carefully and handed it, not to Andrew, who stood with the electrode nervously in his hand, but to Arabella, with a slight bow. He had a lively face, with surprised eyebrows and warm brown eyes.

She really thought she had seen him somewhere before.

"Where are you two headed?" he said. "Some of the lines are coming down. You should be careful what you try to get to."

"Back where we came from, I suppose," Arabella said. "We were looking for a desk light here, as a gift. Something unusual. But they've packed them up."

"The Balloon Market. You've probably heard of it. That's the place to go for anything unusual." He glanced over Arabella's shoulder.

"Time for me to get back." Jill held her pocket watch in her fist like a weapon. "I have a store to pack up. As they say, best of luck in your future endeavors." She slowed just a bit as she got to the stairs, but the telpherman just shrugged.

"This next car goes right past the Balloon Market," he told Arabella. "But you'll have to hurry if you want a seat."

With a couple of steps, he was back up on the back of the telpher car.

"Huh," Andrew said. "Carcery Station, what this engraving shows, is right across the square from the Balloon Market. Father told me the story, how the station came down, when I first got interested in telpher lines."

"They might have lights at the Balloon Market," Arabella said.

"But don't you have to get home . . . ?"

"Don't argue with fate! Just explain what the electrode has to do with it."

They just made it on the car before the telpherman's clamp gripped the cable with a squeal.

"I'm not sure I'm really going to be able to explain the electrode," Andrew said.

"Just tell the story."

"I don't know how Father got interested in the telpher lines. Particularly in the early days, when the whole thing was just getting started." The car was crowded, so Andrew and Arabella were pushed together in a corner, just below the telpherman's seat. "But he learned a lot about them, and not just from books. He must know people."

Father always seemed to know people. A lot of them came to loud parties at the house, and one or two of them ended up in his office—as if the parties were just an

excuse to get a someone upstairs. Sometimes Arabella would wake up at night and hear quiet conversation after the rest of the party had gone silent.

"People needed an easy way to get across town," Andrew said. "The streets were packed. Then someone looked up at the rooftops and saw the obvious solution. Once they figured out the wheels, the cables, and the cars, it was a rush to get the cables up. It's easy to install a wheel, and if you have a strong floor, you can put a little steam engine in under it. The original cars were just old carriages with grips installed on their roofs. Pretty light, and cheap to replace if one fell to the street. So, once you'd put some cable stays on two different roofs and hung up the support cables, you had yourself a telpher route. Then you had the fastest way to get from one place to another.

"So they went up everywhere. Companies formed telpher lines, with collections of routes, and competed on where they could take passengers. The biggest one, the one that got most of the good routes early, was Greensward, Abattoir & Harborworks. But at least five big lines were organized. They fought for business. And one of the ways they fought was by sabotaging each other's routes. If a route was out of operation for a while, its passengers found another line to ride, even if it was less convenient.

"The Black Hill, Cromlech, Execution Square & Imperial Baths line was known for having the best saboteurs. Their gang was called the Spider Monkeys. And they were led by a man named Gibbon."

"Gibbons aren't spider monkeys," Arabella said, before she could stop herself.

"What?"

Now that she'd started, she had to finish. "Spider monkeys are New World monkeys. Gibbons are Old World—"

"You're so smart you probably even know the meaning of the word 'pedantic.'"

Arabella bit back on a retort. She didn't want a fight, not now. Despite her irritation, she found herself wanting to hear Andrew's story. Not just for the no-doubt-exciting adventures of the Spider Monkeys and their misnamed leader. They had an arc-light electrode with a mysterious history, and here was a picture of a young woman operating what was clearly an arc light. That she was wearing a ball gown and . . . Arabella looked closer . . . really great shoes while doing it made learning the story even more urgent.

"I'm sorry, Andrew. Please go on." No one ever gave you credit for *not* doing something you could easily have done. It really wasn't fair.

Andrew said nothing for a moment, but he needed to talk more than he wanted to punish her by not talking.

"Here's the kind of thing Gibbon and the Black Hill Spider Monkeys did," Andrew said, finally. "There was a guy working in Hann's office, name of Pardo. He was a back-office guy, worked the numbers for Hann's line, Greensward, Abattoir & Harborworks. He was the one who planned the building of Carcery Station, which made Greensward dominant in the north of the city. But what he really wanted to do was run a telpher car. Wanted to impress a girl, or something. He begged Hann, but Hann refused. Finally, desperate, Pardo bribed a Greensward telpherman to let him run a car on the Fire Tower-Summer Garden route."

A man and two children sat opposite, a picnic basket at their feet, a champagne bottle and loaf of bread sticking out. The girl glanced at her father, patted him on the shoulder, and then rested her head there. He stroked her hair and stared out of the window. The boy, younger, read an illustrated book.

"Gibbon heard about that. He heard about everything. So, knowing he had an inexperienced telpherman to deal with, he pulled a trick. The night before Pardo was going to take the grip of that route, Gibbon and the Spider Monkeys climbed the

Harem Stairs with some repair equipment they'd liberated from their own line. They added an extra switch on the ceiling of the station there. They drilled a bolt into the big stone tower that supplied water to Clepsydra, the old municipal water clock. They connected a cable to the bolt, and then laid it from the water tower to the Harem Stairs station, hiding it under weeds and scraps of the junk that collects under telpher stations. It was risky, but they got away with it."

"I'm not sure I understand how that worked," Arabella said.

"There's an example right up here," Andrew said. "I'll show you."

The cables climbed up to the bell tower of the deconsecrated Cathedral of St. Hippolytus. The building was famous because of the horse sculptures that decorated its tower and roof. Their heads were thrown back, their manes streamed in the wind, and their hooves were raised up, as if to smash down on an enemy. St. Hippolytus had been torn apart by horses. Arabella didn't know who to admire more: the martyrs for their devotion, or their murderers for the endless inventiveness that had earned the gratitude of generations of artists. Most deaths gave little scope for art, or even a wallpaper border.

The telpher builders had crammed a station in under the mouths of the ponderous bells. The upper areas of the church were now a hostel for the elderly, and it was here that the father and his children got out, with their champagne-and-bread-containing picnic basket. Arabella only hoped that, when she got old, her children and grandchildren would remember the champagne when they came to visit.

"Look up," Andrew said.

Under the beams of the roof ran a bunch of rails, which fanned out like the branches of a tree. Their own car hung from one of them. In a station, telpher cars were essentially upside-down one-railed trains. Several routes ran from the St. Hippolytus station. Just as in a railway yard, the rails would bend slightly when a worker in the station yanked on a switch, and like someone crooking a finger at an open birdcage to get a parakeet to climb onto it, encourage the car to roll onto them. They sloped slightly, so that the car would keep rolling. At the end of each rail was the wheel and moving transport cable of the actual route. The telpherman would slide the car onto that moving cable, engage the grip, and be pulled out of the station.

"The Spider Monkeys just added another switch and cable," Andrew said, as their own car was pulled out from under the bells of St. Hippolytus. "There are some unused ones up here, to routes that have been taken down. It's easy to miss, particularly if you're more interested in stoking up the steam engine to get the wheels turning in the morning."

"When Pardo's car came along, Gibbon and his boys distracted the station workers, tightened the cable, and pulled their own switch in. Pardo was too busy trying to work all the unfamiliar gear to notice that the bump onto the rail was much bigger than it should have been. And by the time he did realize what had happened, it was too late. There was no moving cable, so there was nothing for his grip to connect to. He slid down the support cable that led to Clepsydra, and his car sank right into the big water clock, under the big bronze numbers that marked the hours. It wasn't a busy route, but a few passengers still had to float around, getting their toes nibbled by carp, until someone could fish them out."

"Poor Pardo," Arabella laughed.

"Poor Pardo for sure. Hann had him thrown into Carcery, the old city prison."

"That seems harsh." Arabella was startled. "Pardo was just trying to be a rough, tough telpherman. He just had the bad luck to run into some real rough, tough telphermen."

"Hann was furious," Andrew said. "Who'd trust a telpher line that had cars that could get lost? And the lines were fighting for passengers. Hann and Greensward

were just getting ready to open a station in Carcery Square that would open up routes north in the city. The other lines had nothing that would compete. That was actually what Pardo had been working on when he decided to show off. I hear they gave him a cell overlooking it. The cables ran right under the prison wall, because those big blocks of stone were strong enough to support it."

From St. Hippolytus their car had swooped across a city park and now passed through the upper bleachers of the Arena, where people had built high leaning houses far above what had once been the killing field, which was just a tiny oval from up here. It was now a swamp, where herons stalked frogs.

There was a bustling community up here, raising fish in the old cisterns that had once stored water to hose down unruly crowds. Arabella saw their golden scales and wide eyes drying on a mesh once used by a gladiator to try to catch his opponent. The fall of the telpher lines was going to change these people's lives for sure. Would these descendants of the people in the cheap seats stay here, eventually developing their own language and culture, living on rainwater and fish? Or would they make the long trek down to street level?

Two other people got off here, leaving Arabella and Andrew alone in the car.

"Now, somewhere along the way, Gibbon had met Hann's daughter," Andrew said. "She had fallen for him. I guess she and her father didn't get along. Because when Gibbon asked her to help him get up to the Greensward Carcery Station before it was finished, she agreed.

"Maybe she just liked the puzzle. The station was crucial for Greensward's operation, so Hann had it guarded night and day. Since it hung from the side of the prison, and wasn't yet operational, they were posted on the ground. But she figured out a way. She and Gibbon ran a single line from a nearby cemetery up under the right wing of a statue of a mourning angel memorial, with a support hanging from the elbow of the arm that hid the angel's eyes, then up through the boughs of a couple of trees and up to the top of Carcery Tower, where Hann had allowed her to install an experimental light she was working on. So, one night, Gibbon attached his hanger to—"

"Wait a minute." Arabella had had just about enough of unexplained motivation. "Hann's daughter. Her father was head of Greensward."

"That's right."

"Aren't you going to tell me anything else about her?"

"Like what?"

"Like . . . everything. Did she have a name?"

"Um." He thought. "Dulcie. Her name was Dulcie."

"Are you just making that up to placate me?"

"Would I do something like that?"

"Andrew—"

"No, no kidding. It really was her name. Okay, Dulcinea, probably. Dulcie Decorum, her father's workers called her. Some of them thought she was stuck up."

"I'm sure telpher workers were noted for their classical educations. Dulcie disliked her father enough to help someone sabotage the centerpiece of his line?"

"I guess so. Her mother had died when she was young, and he had no real interest in her, had her raised by nannies and tutors. When Dulcie showed her ability to invent things that were useful for his business, it seemed to annoy Hann rather than please him." Andrew unfolded the newspaper to reveal the young woman who Arabella now knew was Dulcie Hann operating the light. "Like this arc light. Instead of the usual carbon electrodes, it used a new kind, with magnetite and titanium. Lasted longer, gave brighter light. But after all that, Hann wouldn't let her use it for telpher operations. Just, like, for social events and stuff. No wonder she decided to get back at him. Gibbon was just the way that turned up."

"Hey. So that electrode you got from Jill—"

"Is the same one." He hefted the thick black cylinder. "At least I think so."

They both looked up as the telpher car's grip released on the cable, and it coasted to a halt, nowhere near a station. It dangled by the cornice of an office building. They could hear the quiet scrape of the moving cable as it moved past the loose grip.

Through the windows Arabella saw an office with rows of desks and black filing cabinets. A man with slicked-back hair talked to a woman in a pencil skirt as she tried to get a thick file out of the lowest drawer. He watched her as she tugged, but didn't offer to help. Men and women sat at wood desks, pounding on typewriters. They didn't look up as a boy pushed a silver coffee urn past them on a cart, pouring cups with sleepy precision. A paper airplane sailed by and landed on a desk.

The telpherman climbed out of the car. Andrew and Arabella exchanged a glance, then looked out of the window. The telpherman pulled himself smoothly over the cornice.

"Is something wrong?" Arabella asked.

"Not at all. Do you have an appointment you need to get to?"

"The Balloon Market. Don't you remember?"

"I'll just be a moment." And he was gone.

Arabella took the opportunity to look into the bucket the telpherman had carried down from the roof at the station with the antique store. In its bottom were four pigeon eggs, two pinkish, one bluish, one more blue green, smeared with bird droppings. Why had just the sight of them annoyed Jill the antiques dealer?

"So," Andrew said, "One night, Gibbon went into the cemetery with a hanger, which was really just a grip with places for your hands and feet. The younger guys used them to check for cable damage, stuff like that. As he was hooking it onto the hidden cable, he almost fell into a newly dug grave, right at the angel's feet. The angel was a memorial to prisoners who died without getting released, and this was another sacrifice to it. But whoever had dug it had stuck to their job and not noticed the cable in the bushes. Gibbon got on the hanger and pedaled up to Carcery Station.

"He'd brought a bar breaker, so it didn't take him long to snap some of the crucial support struts that held the station onto the side of Carcery. The station sagged and tilted out of alignment, far enough that it would take weeks to repair the damage. Then he went a little too far. He loosened a return wheel. It was heavier than he thought. It fell right through the floor of the station and crashed to the street, pulling a lot of the station with it.

"That finally woke up the Greensward guards. He had to get out of there. But the wheel had left a big hole between him and his hanger. The only way to get to it was to climb up and across the upper line of cells, above the stations. The prisoners were pretty much awake now. They cursed, they begged him to help them escape, they tried to grab him when he crossed their cells. Then, he almost fell into a cell. The bars were loose. But he could see that there was a prisoner in there, silent and unmoving.

"Maybe it had been the stress of all the hours preparing for escape, or just the fact that those cells were exposed to the weather, and notoriously unhealthy. That man had managed to get close to freeing himself, but would never make it. He'd never get out of that cell alive."

"Dead." Arabella thought about it. "The empty grave under the angel!"

Andrew grinned. "You know, I've never held with those people who think you're slow."

"That's very loyal of you."

Arabella could see that their driver was now in the office talking to the woman in the pencil skirt, who finally had the huge file spread open on her desk. The man

with the slicked back hair pretended to be detailing his precise order to the bored youth with the coffee cart, but snuck glances at what she and the telpherman were doing. She smiled at the telpherman, blinking and tilting her head, and finally handed him a telephone. The telpherman dialed, said a few words. Then he hung up and put the phone down.

"The body of the dead prisoner lay there on its pallet, waiting to be taken down to an anonymous grave in the cemetery. And the delay had given the Greensward boys a chance to close in on him. He was close to capture. Then Gibbon had an inspiration. He unwound the funeral shroud and hauled the body out through the window. With a few quick twists of the emergency line all telpher workers carried with them, he attached the corpse to his repair hanger and set it on its way down the wire.

"The slope of the wire meant it really looked like a living person was in control of the hanger. It must have been a sight, a dead man dangling from the wire, whizzing through the trees at night. The Greensward team saw it, and naturally thought it was Gibbon, making his escape. They all chased after it, wanting to be in at the kill.

"Word of Gibbon's situation got out to the Spider Monkeys, and they came out to Carcery Square in force. The Greensward guys, having realized by this time that they'd been duped, fought back. When the police finally brought it under control, Carcery Station was completely destroyed."

The telpherman in the office made a few more faces at the woman at the desk, but he was clearly done, and interested in getting back to his car. He danced out, making a joke of it. The other man sipped his coffee solemnly, saucer in hand, and watched him go. The woman, now annoyed, curled her thumbs together and flapped her hands like a bird's wings at the telpherman's disappearing back.

"The newspapers whooped it up. You know: rioting workers, irresponsible management, physical danger, violations of prison security—the result was government regulation, by popular demand. They broke the independent telpher lines, calling them 'bandits,' unified them, and brought them all under city control, as part of North Metropolitan Aerial Transport. Most of the Spider Monkeys, and the others, were fired."

That only seemed reasonable to Arabella, though she wasn't going to say it. "What happened to Gibbon? How did he get away?"

"He didn't. He got hit over the head with a falling strut early in the festivities, and it knocked him unconscious. By the time he came to, he was the only telpherman left on the scene. They arrested him. And threw him into Carcery."

"I believe that's what you call 'irony,'" Arabella said.

"Well, maybe *you* do. By the time Gibbon got out, there wasn't any place for him. He went abroad, to work on steamships."

Arabella waited a moment. "Is that it? What about Dulcie? What about the light?"

"I don't know, Arabella. That's what I know."

"We're just going to have to know more, then."

"Sorry for the delay." The telpherman hopped back into his seat and engaged the grip.

The old ballroom that held the Balloon Market had an astoundingly high ceiling, most of it panels of glass that showed the sky. Just then, there were only five balloons, partially inflated and bumping for escape: two large cross-country tubes and three smaller utility gasbags dangling repair equipment and spare parts. Just below were the arched galleries where the older folks had once gathered to watch the younger people dance. Those were now piled with compressors, dismantled mooring masts, and other massive support gear.

Past a couple of food sellers near the entrance, dealer booths crowded what had

once been the ballroom floor. Arabella and Andrew were both out of place here. This was a market for actual ballooning, or *lufting* professionals: miners in remote areas, arctic explorers, and, of course, the operators of cross-desert tracked balloon lines, trying to make a living connecting remote locations. Arabella saw a desert balloonist, goggles up on her headdress, heavy gauntlets in shoulder straps in true desert buzzard style, examining some equipment dangling from chains.

"Any ground gimbals?" she asked the proprietor, a short woman with eyes rimmed in black kohl. "They need to be transportable."

The proprietor used a lot of pomade on her dark hair, so it didn't move when she shook her head, which she gave the impression of doing often. "Nah. I do mostly task lighting. He might have something." She pointed at a neighboring booth.

Andrew walked over and looked up at a collection of lighting equipment that projected from an actual moored balloon, suitable for a single observer. "What are the maintenance requirements for those?"

The woman couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Maintenance? Where are you taking it? The North Pole?"

"It's a gift for my father. For his office."

"His office is inside, right? Not in a volcano or something."

"Well, yes."

"So I don't care if his pet cockatiel perches on the chain and fouls it daily. It's built to take real work. Okay, a bit of light oil every month or so wouldn't go amiss. Not too much, or it will get on your nice clothes." She examined Andrew with a bit less sympathy than he was used to. "But you're the wrong customer for this equipment. Please don't waste both our time. There are some *luft*-style gadgets by the back wall, mooring pitons and the like. Don't do much, but look impressive. One of those would be a better choice." She saw someone in the crowd. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some real business to attend to."

Unable to think of anything to say, Andrew retreated in defeat to the shelter of same hanging *lufting* fabrics. Arabella followed, and found the woman desert balloonist examining gimbals. She had a line of three diamond-shaped scars on her right cheekbone, marking some level of achievement Arabella didn't understand.

"Instantly responsive!" the salesman enthused. "Keeps you pointed into the prevailing wind at all time. They used these for recovering the wreck of the *Arethusa*, and you know how stormy it is there. Eighteen watermelon balloons with pointed noses. Even the late fall gales didn't knock them down—they kept pointed right into it."

"They never recovered the *Arethusa*." The woman was really quite small, Arabella saw. The quilted boots, protection against hot rock, made her taller.

"That was pirates, miss, not the storm. They came down the wind when things were at their worst. The salvage crew scuttled the ship just in time, though. The pirates got nothing."

"They got your balloons."

"Not a technical failure, is what I'm saying. This gimbal was in no way responsible."

She examined it, seeing its degrees of freedom, where it stuck and where it moved smoothly. Then she hefted it. "How much does this weigh?"

"I'll have to look at the specs...."

"Too heavy. If I wanted to spin around on top of a mountain, maybe. But I'm trying to run a mobile business."

"We should go," Andrew said. "There's nothing for us here."

"If you say so." Arabella was reluctantly aware that people were waiting for them at home. But surely they couldn't go there, not yet....

"Give me a peek at that engraving," she said.

Andrew gave her a suspicious look—he'd gone from regarding it as mere electrode wrapping to a valued personal possession—but opened it for her.

She looked around at the ballroom. It still looked much as it did in the picture, down to the two statues that flanked the entrance: a mammoth and a sabertooth, rampant and facing each other, the ancient native animals that had been in the city's coat of arms since it was nothing but swamps inhabited by long-limbed bears that swam up and scooped explorers out of their galleys like connoisseurs slurping oysters.

But the date . . . Seventeen years before, not long before they had been born, in fact, but the day after the Golden Fleece Ball, which had been, as Arabella knew, the peak of the old social season. And it had been held right here in this room. The floor under their feet, where you could see it, still showed its high quality, polished and springy. You could dance here all night and not get sore feet.

And there was Dulcie. Arabella had searched through those finely dressed people gathered at the windows, and finally found someone she was sure was the young engineer. It showed her from behind, but the pattern of the low-backed gown seemed the same as the one worn by the woman operating the light. What connection had she had with the fall of Carcery Station? She certainly had been here that same night, able to see it as it happened.

Light flared through layers of gauzy aerial fabric, like the sun rising through sea mist. Arabella and Andrew peeked around, to find the light seller, unexpectedly, smiling and gesturing them over.

"The chain lights are for close-in work when you can't actually get close in." She demonstrated how the armored bulb could be lowered from the arm, exactly as if they'd been friends all along. "When the wind is high, you don't want to get close up to the rock or the ice face or whatever, but a general arc light is just distracting. Are you interested in the matching impact drill, maybe? And these remote claws come as a graduated set of five, but are as smooth as any you'll find."

She didn't look entirely sincere, Arabella thought. What had made her change her mind about selling lights to non-professionals? Feeling a bit perverse, Arabella decided to test the woman's patience.

"I'd like to test one at altitude," Arabella said.

"What?"

Arabella looked up at the tethered display balloon. "Pay me out, and let's see how the light works."

The woman narrowed her eyes, but whatever was making her help them was pretty strong. She finally shrugged.

"Go ahead, then. Check it out." She gave one sharp shake of her head as Andrew tried to step forward. "Only one of you. And I'm not giving rides here. Check out the operation and purchase what's appropriate. Now, excuse me. There's something I need to take care of."

The woman paid out the line and Arabella floated up along the crumbling plaster of the back wall. She glanced up, hoping to see more of the glass roof, but of course her entire view was of the patched fabric of the utility balloon. It was only now that she realized that when lufters flew, they saw everything but the sky.

But she did get high enough to catch a view of the black stone of Carcery through the high windows at the ballroom's far end. No trace of the old telpher station that had caused all the trouble remained, but she could see the open stairs leading to the top of the tower, five or six stories above the mass of the prison, where Dulcie's experimental light had shone down, and where Gibbon's hanger cable had been attached. At its base were the cells where Gibbon had found the corpse that had allowed him to escape the enraged Greensward workers.

The entire scene that night would have been visible through the mist from up

here, if anyone could have spared the attention from the ball. If Dulcie had indeed been here that night, Arabella couldn't imagine her not keeping track of what was going on over there.

But she was supposed to be testing their potential purchase. She found the pegs that controlled the light. It took her a few tries to figure out, and it wiggled back and forth. She imagined the woman below, rolling her eyes at this incompetence. Arabella finally got it right, and lowered the light smoothly.

Okay, so, that night, Gibbon had pedaled his hanger to the top of that tower, run down the stairs, and started his sabotage of the station . . . that all seemed to work. When he was detected by the Greensward guards, he could easily run back up, get back on the hanger, and make his escape.

But that wasn't what had happened, at least according Andrew's story. Gibbon had taken a body and hauled it up those flights of stairs to the top, tied it to the hanger, and then sent it off. Then he had descended the tower again, to be knocked out by a falling strut in the station's collapse.

That corpse-decoy story made some sense, but not quite enough to satisfy Arabella. Something was missing.

She glanced down. Hidden from everyone on floor level by piles of gear, the lighting booth proprietor was kissing a man. She had one beringed hand on the back of his head, while the other tugged at his dark jacket. Arabella couldn't see his face, but that was a telpherman's jacket. His bucket stood amid some oddly shaped mooring weights.

Outside the booth, Andrew stood pretending to examine some lighting accessories, completely unaware of what was going on a few feet from him. Arabella indulged herself by feeling smarter than him, because of what she could see.

The proprietor's hand brushed the telpherman's shoulder . . . and came away with a pigeon feather. She stared at it for a second, her black-rimmed eyes almost comically wide, and then turned away from him. Accidentally or on purpose, her heel kicked the bucket and knocked it over. The telpherman scrambled to right it. Arabella had time for one last look around, and then she was pulled down by the mooring cable.

Despite how ridiculous the light was, Arabella rather thought Father would like one. It was better suited for peering down dark crevasses on some windswept glacier, or supporting a rescue mission for a downed balloon in some midnight-black taiga, than for reading the newspaper. But, of course, that was the point.

There was an argument going on when she got down.

"But it's perfect," Andrew said.

"Too perfect for you," the woman said. "I have some commercial customers who are going to be needing those lights. I was just notified."

"But we were here first."

"You were here. I wouldn't say first."

"What happened?" Arabella asked.

"I got a rush order for the full set is what happened," the woman said. "Regular customers, with real work to do. I should have more of these in a month or so. You can check back then."

The telpherman must have put in a good word or something, and gotten the light seller to at least pay attention to them, Arabella realized. Maybe he'd even promised to kiss her to seal the deal. But now his influence was at an end. He'd disgraced himself—by revealing his devotion to some pigeon eggs. There was no way they were leaving with any of these lights.

And that was it. Despite the oddness of the place, Arabella had felt a kind of acceptance. But now, as they walked between the dangling cables, it seemed that everyone had turned their backs on them. They'd violated some unspoken rule, and

were no longer to be tolerated. Even the desert girl had vanished, off on her mysterious mission, and when Andrew stopped at a sandwich stand near the entrance, it was some effort to even get the counterman to look at him.

Out on the platform it was moving on to afternoon, and despite the cool breeze, the sun was warm on their faces. Arabella found herself delighted to be out for the day with her cranky and often uncooperative brother, whom she loved. It would be the last such day for a long time. She thought about taking his arm. No. That would be going a bit too far.

"Andrew," Arabella said. "I have a question for you."

He unwrapped the tomato-egg sandwich he'd finally squeezed out of the reluctant sandwich maker and sighed at its skimpiness. "It's about the story, isn't it? Well, you might as well. Better than having you keep looking at me all knowing and pitying."

He wasn't going to stop her like that. "How did Gibbon get that body out of its cell and all the way up to the top of the tower?"

Andrew took her question seriously and looked up at the tower, that odd bit of Gothic decoration on an otherwise grim block of black stone. He frowned, and she could see him running through the possibilities.

"Okay," he said. "It would have been a physical challenge. Not impossible, but hard. What's your alternative?"

"I'm just having trouble believing that Dulcie deliberately allowed Gibbon to destroy Carcery Station. Even if she was head over heels in love with him, she would have tried to find another way to show it."

"But she did get him up there. Why would she have done that?"

"Well . . . maybe she needed Gibbon to go up to Carcery and rescue someone for her. Bust her *real* lover out of prison. Then it makes sense. She hired Gibbon, persuaded him, whatever. He went up there, and he did it. That was why he was carrying that bar breaker, to pry out the cell bars. He did it, and got her guy out, and off on the hanger. Then, looking around . . ."

"He realized that he was up there in an undefended telpher station just ripe for being taken down. Not too bright of your girl, is it? Giving a known telpher saboteur access to her father's most important station like that."

"Maybe not," she said. "But she was keeping an eye on things."

"What? How?"

Arabella told him about the timing of the ball. "I don't think it's coincidence that it happened on the very night she was up here, with a good view across the square. Do you?"

Andrew just opened the engraving and pointed to the misty vignette of Gibbon clutching his head and falling backward as a strut hit him. "I guess that explains where this thing came from, then. I just took it for granted."

She looked where he pointed. What she had interpreted as a strut from somewhere in the station's complex structure was, on second glance, actually a tool, the bar breaker that Gibbon had brought up with him to free the prisoner, according to Arabella's theory, or to damage the station, according to Andrew's. But it wasn't falling from anything, it was—

"Oh, my goodness!" she said. "Who—?"

The effect was quite astonishing. The swirling mist in front of Gibbon snapped into clarity: it was a figure, cloaked in white, who held the bar breaker like a club, and had just deliberately struck Gibbon down.

But if you got distracted, by, say, the details of the stone wall behind, or the heavy bolts that connected the station to the wall, the figure became mist again, as if you'd been seeing faces in the clouds.

"Well," Andrew said, oddly satisfied. "You know who would have been anxious to give our Gibbon one across the skull."

"Who?"

"Our old buddy Pardo! Who else? Gibbon humiliated him, at Clepsydra. Gibbon couldn't have known who Dulcie was sending him to rescue, not until it was too late. Think she did that on purpose?"

Despite the fact that she had thought of him as an innocent victim of Gibbon's cruel practical joke, Arabella had trouble seeing Pardo as Dulcie's secret lover. An accountant in her father's offices? But then, that might explain why her father, Hann, punished him so severely for the loss of the telpher car. He might just have been putting an end to an inappropriate relationship.

She imagined Dulcie, in her gown at the ball, watching as her lover emerged from his cell and knocked Gibbon over the head with the same tool Gibbon had used to rescue him. That wasn't what Arabella had expected at all.

"But that doesn't make sense," she said. "Once Gibbon was knocked out, and Pardo . . . whoever . . . had stolen his hanger and escaped, how would the Spider Monkeys have found out about it?" She pictured the appalled Dulcie running out into the streets in her ball gown, catching her heel on loose cobbles, trying to find those men who had struggled against her father's interests for so long . . .

"Your version may be wrong, but not for that reason. You didn't look carefully enough at the fight scene here." In the vignette next to the scene of the mysterious figure hitting Gibbon over the head, men in evening wear fought on the struts of the station. Evening wear? No. She saw one, swinging a crowbar, who wore a white apron. Another wore a sommelier's tasting cup around his neck. . . .

"Telpheremen often earned extra money working parties," Andrew said. "Waiters, servers, ushers. If that party was as big as you say, it probably had half the telpher-men in the city working it. Certainly the Spider Monkeys, who were always short of money. If they saw someone take Gibbon out like this, they would have abandoned their duties and been right over there. And, let me tell you, this looks like almost every telpherman in the city. No wonder the place went down."

A telpher car emerged around the building's corner, pulled by their own telpherman, pigeon droppings now cleaned from his shoulders. He hooked it onto the static cable. Arabella imagined him formally dressed and wearing a white apron.

Of course. She made her way toward him. When he saw her, he stepped away from the telpher car, as if caught doing something he shouldn't.

"I've seen you before," she said. "At our house. Last winter. A party. Big one, my mother's. Mother hates parties, so when she has one, it has too many people at it. I'm getting better at the names, but I still don't know half of who's there. When I was little, I would peek down from the top of the stairs, until they chased me up."

"Drinks table," he said. "Soda water. The occasional ice cube."

"You'll get more responsibility someday, I'm sure."

"I live on hope."

Was she remembering the right night? They all blended together in her head. There was always the surf of voices with the occasional louder crash of laughter, the smoke from the big fireplace they usually didn't use because it drew so badly, the feel of the fur collars, sheepskin, velvet on the heavy coats on the beds. Once she'd fallen asleep in them, and been found by a drunken and self-amused man who kept trying to put the little girl on around his neck until she cried and ran to her room.

But she hadn't seen their telpherman by the drinks table. She'd caught just a glimpse of him in the upper hall, as he headed for the back stairs. She'd assumed that the wait staff had stored something up there, but now that she thought about it, that made no sense at all. It was a lot of narrow, steep stairs down to the party from there. What could he have been serving that required that kind of secrecy?

"No." She was sure. "Not at the drinks table. Not downstairs."

"You startled me," he said. "You came out of the dark like a ghost."

She'd been wearing her good nightgown, she remembered with a sense of relief, the one with the embroidery on the hem. Still, she wished she could have been better prepared. . . .

"Shouldn't you have said 'like an angel'?" she said.

His smile looked tired. "I don't think you and I have time for that. But I will say that you did seem . . . weightless."

"Are you trying to decide?" She took the plunge. "Which of your girlfriends to stay with when the wires go down?"

"No. I've already decided. I knew long ago. But I pretended I didn't. But if I hadn't already decided . . ."

"Yes?"

He looked at her. No one had ever looked at her so thoroughly before. Or, maybe, it was just that no one had ever seen her the way she was now, because this particular Arabella had never existed before. Would this Arabella still be around after tomorrow, when she got on the train to her school in the mountains and vanished into whatever experience waited for her up there? Her telpherman might be the only one who ever got to see this particular person.

"If I hadn't already decided, I might be reconsidering."

She turned away, afraid of showing a blush. He must know exactly what he could do to her, which was a bit annoying. "That's just another way of saying 'angel,' while meaning 'ghost.' You've got those eggs, and that's all you care about."

"Not all." He was suddenly brisk. "This car heads north. Only way the line is running now, but there are connections you can make at Fire Tower, at least until sunset. Which way will you head?"

"It depends." Andrew had come up behind Arabella. "Any lights available that way?"

The telpherman reached up and put something on a cornice above the platform. "Something might well turn up. But maybe you should wait here. . . ."

"For what?" Andrew said.

The telpherman shook his head. "Nothing. But this car has to go." He raised his voice. "All aboard!"

After sitting down, Arabella unwrapped the sandwich Andrew handed her, and the rich smell of prosciutto and herbs filled the car. If this was what the sandwich seller produced in a hostile mood, those balloonists were lucky indeed. But she was getting distracted by the food. She leaned out just as the car swung away from the platform and looked back to see what the telpherman had left behind.

Balanced delicately on the cornice was a single blue-green egg.

As they rose up the wire they got one last look at the black bulk of Carcery, and then they were sliding past the gasometers and wharves on the back side of the river. Glittering coal lay in sinuous piles. Smoke and steam rose from pipes and smokestacks.

Arabella and Andrew sat quietly together for a while. An old man and an only slightly less old woman dozed across from them, matching flowered bags at their feet. Where would they sleep now, when the comforting rocking telpher cars were gone?

The telpherman again slowed and stopped in the middle of the route, against the side of another building. Arabella could see him peering across the flat rooftops, with one long row of chimneys and another of stairway bulkheads. Five or six building widths away, a woman came out of a stairway door, accompanied by a girl wearing an out-of-fashion bonnet. They climbed over the parapets and got a building closer. Visiting nurses and other social workers often made their way from one building to

another this way, Arabella knew, because their poor clients lived in the upper floors. They indeed each carried a small black bag.

They finally clambered aboard as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Arabella and Andrew slid over to give them room, and the car moved smoothly away from the building.

The woman turned, looking as if she was about to say something to the telpherman—but then caught sight of the bucket of pigeon's eggs. She frowned, shifted position as if she'd sat on something, and balanced her black bag on the bucket's edge as she adjusted her dress.

The girl gasped and reached for it, but she was too late. The car bumped over a support pylon and pulled around a pulley into a turn. The bag fell into the bucket.

She yanked it out. Yolk dripped from a corner. She glanced up at the telpherman in horror. He was either busy with the approach to the next station, or just accepting of fate, and said nothing.

"How clumsy of me," the mother said. "I didn't see those eggs. But could you check my lens?"

Arabella thought that the girl had never seen this part of her mother before. Arabella realized she might easily be sitting in the back of this girl's memories someday, as a boot, a hand on a window edge, a vague head, while the focus was on a worn black bag with a gleam of broken egg on its corner, and a mother who had suddenly revealed needs and angers far beyond whatever was allowed out at home.

A few snaps, and the girl had opened the bag and pulled out what looked like a brass miner's lamp, with a big round lens. She turned it over, then glanced at her mother, who now sat with her eyes half closed, as if ready to join the older couple in a nap.

"Excuse me," Andrew said. "But if you don't mind my asking, where did you get that lantern?"

Arabella wanted to look into the bucket to see how many eggs were left, but couldn't find a way to do it without being obvious.

"I . . ." The girl glanced at her mother, who nodded permission without opening her eyes. "Lots of times the stairs are dark. There are supposed to be lights, but they're broken, or no one pays to put them on. He, um, heard us." She jerked a thumb at the telpherman, who shifted his boots in a modest way. "One day when we were trying to figure out what to do about it. He found these somewhere up in the mountains, in a mine. He gave us them. They're miner lights. You put rocks in them, and they burn in the water. You get gunk left that you have to throw away."

"They work by a chemical reaction," the woman explained. "That makes it easy to have the fuel with you when you need it."

"And on cold days, they keep you warm," the girl said. "I like mine a lot." She glanced back at the telpherman to see if he had heard.

"It's all right that you like it," her mother said. "But this is our stop." The car entered a station atop a warehouse. The wide tar and gravel roof spread out in all directions like a high-altitude desert. Three beach chairs stood in a row, their slings blowing up in the wind. The old couple woke from their nap and, rested and ready for the rest of their day, got off, along with the mother and daughter, leaving Arabella and Andrew alone in the car, which now had nowhere to go.

"Come on, Andrew," Arabella said. "That's ridiculous. A carbide miner's lamp? Why would Father want something like that?"

Andrew had to get something. He was just like that. He leaned back and addressed the telpherman. "Are there any more of these lamps up there, do you know?"

"You'll have to see," the telpherman said. "Follow me."

The telpherman led them across the gravel, to a side route, one barely above  
The Day the Wires Came Down

freight-hauling. There wasn't even any glass in the car windows. It climbed quickly up the hills. Up to the brow of the first line of hills the houses got bigger. Then they got smaller again, and finally disappeared.

In places, this route was almost vertical. There were a couple of pylons with double return wheels, no power. Only a really light car would make it all the way up here.

Arabella looked across the foothills, which were just starting to look more like wrinkles than like obstacles, and saw the afternoon train north just pulling out of the northern rail yard.

Andrew leaned across her. "You've never taken it, have you? Look at that locomotive! Two sets of eight drive wheels to get it up over the passes. And each one is six feet across! Tomorrow it will be hauling you. I hear they serve a nice supper. Linen tablecloths."

"Never mind the linen."

From this height the massive locomotive made no sound. Its cloud of black smoke showed how hard it was working, though, as it got that long string of white-and-marrow coaches moving up the slope. Amid the green wrinkles of the rising hills, the cylinder of the locomotive's boiler looked like a dropped pencil lead.

It all seemed too complicated. How much easier it would have been to just take a telpher car to school in the morning and come home at night. That seemed to have the appropriate lightness to it. Everything about the night train north had a crushing heaviness.

The telpher route had long ago left anything worth stopping at. They found themselves flying over rough country, with only the occasional farmhouse and flock of sheep to indicate that they had not passed into completely wild lands. The wind was stronger up here, and gusts made the light car rock back and forth.

They cleared a stand of hemlocks, and there was the end of the line, where a lanky fire tower spread legs over jagged rocks. Nearby was a comfortable-looking log building with a green roof, and a series of pigeon coops. An ornamental pigeon with a huge crest perched on the finger of a woman with long red hair, who wore a forest-green jacket and sand-colored trousers. Neither of them seemed interested in who had just arrived.

The telpherman pulled the car aside, then picked up his bucket and walked up to the red-haired woman.

He'd had been heading for this woman all day. But it seemed he couldn't come to see her without some kind of offering: pigeons' eggs. New blood for her brood. Some speed, or some color—something new that she could use for her breeding. But what else was he bringing her?

The bucket didn't please her. "That's it?" Arabella imagined her asking. For, after the events of the day, there was only a single egg left in there. Maybe she recognized it as belonging to a common rock pigeon, one with nothing unusual about it.

Andrew tugged at her arm. "Come on. See the tailings down the slope? They were digging just below here. Look, there's a trail."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Arabella followed reluctantly. "Do you really think any of those stupid lamps is left here?"

"I don't know," he said. "But we have to look."

There was a trail down through hillside shrubs onto a pile of cracked rock and gravel dug out of the mountain's hard side. Nothing of the city was visible from up here, not even its smoke. They looked down on a landscape of mountains and forests. A lake sparkled through the pines below. The sun hung uncomfortably low. They were as far from home as it was possible to get without actually joining the army or being kidnapped by pirates.

Arabella imagined her mother working over the cake. Basketweave frosting. That

was what she'd planned. Her mother hated all forms of entertaining, so, as a penance, made the events she did have as elaborate and labor-intensive as she could. She'd been making and straining stock all week. And, all this day, Arabella hadn't been there to help.

She'd have to deal with the consequences when they finally got home. But only for one day. Then she'd be gone.

A few steps into the blasted-out mine entrance made their problem obvious: you needed a light to search for lights in a dark tunnel. And they didn't have one.

It was painful to watch Andrew. Her brother was as frustrated as she'd ever seen him, gasping for breath as if descending into the mine was like diving into deep water. He walked in slowly, feeling both walls, and descended the steep steps that started just inside. He paused, letting his eyes adjust, and then went farther.

But all too soon he ran out of light. He felt forward with his fingertips.

"Andrew! That's ridiculous. You'll fall into something eventually. If you want to look for a carbide lamp here, we'll have to mount a proper expedition, now that we know where this place is."

"His birthday is in only a couple of days," Andrew said dully. "We have to get him something. Let's ask the firewatcher. The redhead woman. She must have something we can use."

"You ask her," Arabella said.

"Um . . ." Andrew wasn't that quick with people, but even he had to have sensed the tension between the firewatcher and the telpherman. "There must be something around here . . ." He walked forward. She held her breath, waiting for a cry and a long fall down an invisible pit. "Wait, wait! I've found something." She heard him fumbling around in the dark somewhere. Then he reemerged into the light, holding . . . a metal mess kit. It looked in good shape, and had all its utensils clamped to its side.

Andrew stared down at it in betrayal. Then he turned and threw it, with great force, back into the darkness. They waited for a disturbingly long time. Finally, there was a single dismal clang.

Andrew slumped after Arabella as she walked back up the hill to the rudimentary telpher platform. The telpherman and the fire spotter had vanished. Pigeons fussed in their coops. The bucket stood near the water tank, empty. Arabella looked up at the fire tower. The woman was up there. The windows were open, and her long red hair flared out in the breeze.

The telpher man sat, dismayed and long-legged, on the tower's bottom steps. Arabella glanced up again. It was clear that, even if she were inclined to let it down, the woman's hair was not long enough for him to climb up to gain access.

It was pretty long, though.

"Who's that?" Andrew said.

Arabella squinted past him at the telpher wire. Far below them, another car was coming up. A small one.

No, not a car at all. A man. A man clinging to the wire.

A man on a hanger.

He wasn't bothering to pedal, since this wire was still moving. As he came into view, Arabella saw a plump middle-aged gentleman with an official look about him, graying brown chin beard and whiskers, wearing a coat with a fur collar. He had a hunched posture, as Arabella certainly would have had, hanging on to a wire hundreds of feet in the air.

He slid up to the platform, unhooked the hanger, slid it onto a different side rail than the telpher car . . . and collapsed gasping on his hands and knees.

"I swore . . ." he said to the ground. "I swore I'd never do that again as long as I lived. I remember being quite formal about it."

He seemed to realize only slowly that he wasn't alone. He rolled over, sat up, and looked up at Arabella and Andrew. "Ah. You're still here." His blue eyes had a businesslike sharpness, not matching his slightly fussy demeanor.

"Who are you?" Andrew asked.

"The ghost of every telpherman who ever tried to turn a profit from this miserable form of transportation."

He stood up slowly, brushing the dust off his knees. He looked toward the telpherman at the fire tower's base. He raised his voice. "Hey!"

The telpherman looked up, then jumped as the man reached into a pocket, pulled something out, and threw it in a long underhand lob.

The telpherman reached and, with his long arm, snagged it from the air. He held it up between his fingers: a pigeon's egg, a pale blue-green.

Then he was running up the stairs to the top of the fire tower.

"We've got to move along here," said the man, who was clearly some kind of telph high official. "Some of the lines have already let their fires go out and are running on stored steam pressure. Sparing of anthracite, but it might leave you in a difficult position."

"He left that egg for you," Arabella said. "As a sign to follow us. Why?"

He sighed. "I should have caught up to you at the Balloon Market. It would have been a more convenient location for a negotiation, but I understand that my young friend got into some of his usual trouble there and had to move on. You are in possession of something I would dearly like to have."

"Does this engraving contain a picture of you?" Andrew obviously wanted this to be Gibbon. Equally obviously, it wasn't.

"Not a good one," the man snapped. "You'd think after all that time looking at me, she could have given me a slightly sharper look—"

"Dulcie did the engraving?" Arabella had been wondering about the identity of the artist, but had assumed it was just some unusually skilled newspaper employee.

"That girl . . ." He shook his head. "That picture helped me in ways you won't understand, but I still didn't like being drawn like some kind of semi-invisible wraith. It told me too clearly what she really felt about me. But, no. I'm not interested in the engraving. I'm after that big black electrode of yours. I let the pieces of Dulcie's special arc light escape me back then, and I've been trying to collect them ever since."

Andrew swallowed his disappointment at the man's identity. "Pardo. You've come back."

"I never left. I've been running North Municipal Aerial Transport for over fifteen years, thank you very much. Our friend Gribbins is the one who left, on his adventures."

"Gribbins?"

"You probably know him by his absurd *nom de téléphérique*, Gibbon. Say, did you know that gibbons are Old World—"

"We did," Andrew said, a bit rudely.

Pardo, if indeed it was he, was not offended.

"Well, if you know that, you realize that you can't possibly have the whole story. Maybe if I give it to you, it will smooth our exchange." He looked up at the tower. Two figures stood up in it now, side by side. "That last egg seems to have done the trick. You can never tell what offering a goddess requires to unbend. Not as predictable as we'd like. Odd, though, that he brought so few."

"He lost some along the way," Arabella said.

"He risked them to get us together," Pardo said. "From the moment he saw that electrode in your hands, he knew he had to do it, even putting his own happiness at risk. He's a good man."

Arabella remembered the telpherman borrowing the telephone in the office. He

had been getting in touch with Pardo, while managing to take care of his own affairs at the same time.

Pardo walked past them, took hold of the telpher car, and brought it down off its rail onto the moving wire. "Ready?"

Arabella and Andrew exchanged a glance, then got on.

"Could one of you, perhaps, run the grip?" Pardo was suddenly tentative. "I'll guide you. But . . . I've had a phobia about running a telpher car. I've run the entire system, but the idea of having a grip lever in my hand makes me queasy."

Andrew and Arabella quickly did rock, paper, scissors. Arabella lost, as she usually did, and Andrew jumped up on the telpherman's seat.

"The thing to remember is that the grip's normal state is on, holding the wire, almost a part of it. The work is in getting it to let go. So be easy when you bring it—"

Something snapped, and they were jerked to full speed.

"Sorry," Andrew said above.

"It takes a while. That was quite good for a start." Pardo settled himself on a bench and looked out at the hills as they got gathered in beneath the car. "Let's see what you understand so far. Why do you think they threw me into Carcery?"

Arabella hadn't expected to start with a quiz. "Ah, I thought it was because you had lost a telpher car in Clepsydra. And . . . because Hann was worried about you and Dulcie."

Pardo smiled to himself. "Wouldn't the world have been a grand and brave place if that had been the reason? I could have sat happily in the dampest cell in Carcery's cellar in that case."

"But it wasn't just because you were the victim of Gibbon's joke," she said.

"Oh, certainly not. That would have made Hann mad at me, but madder at 'Gibbon.' As it was, he saw it as convenient. Gibbon never knew the vengeance he had escaped because of that. No, Hann had good reason to want me out of the way. I had . . . I was young, understand. Young and ambitious. And I'd managed to develop some habits hard to maintain on a telpher clerk's salary. So I had been . . . skimming money from the operation."

"Skimming?" Arabella said.

"Okay. Stealing. I was good at it. Hann suspected where the money was going, but he could never figure out how I did it. Then I sank the car in Clepsydra and he had his excuse."

The line bent around a deflector wheel and suddenly its full length down to the city was burning in the light of the setting sun.

"I lay in my cell in despair. I could watch the construction of the Carcery Station. I'd had a hand in its placement, as part of our expansion plan to the north. It was like they were taunting me with it. But that was fine. I had been given a chance to consider my sins at leisure, and I did so. Of course, imprisoned in a cell, we all feel ourselves virtuous, because we don't have the freedom to commit further crimes. Still, thinking isn't nothing. And I thought.

"Until the night I heard a clanking outside my cell. I looked out—and saw Gibbon. He was standing, looking across the square at something, and occasionally tapping a bar cutter against my bars. For a minute I thought he had repented of his humiliation of me and had come to make amends by freeing me. Which was, of course, what he had convinced Dulcie he was going to do. He'd sought her out, knowing she felt I had been unfairly treated—and knowing how she chafed under the restrictions her father had put on her. She wanted to build her devices, do her work, help out the line, and he had no interest in it. He just wanted her to make a good show at the ball."

"Nothing wrong with that," Arabella said. "Even a girl inventor likes to make a good show at the ball."

Pardo smiled reminiscently. "And she did. But, even so, she made sure that Gibbon made his attempt the night she was there, across the square, able to keep an eye on him. She was overconfident. Gibbon was smarter than she thought. Than any of us did, actually. He always seemed like just a crazy man, but he knew what he was doing.

"Dulcie was watching, but Gibbon knew she couldn't see that much. So he made a big production of cutting through my bars, as they had agreed, while actually doing almost nothing. I figured it out pretty quickly. He was going to fake freeing me, then run into some trouble, go over to get something, and sabotage the station in secret, at an angle Dulcie couldn't observe. Then, eventually, he'd pretend to give up, leaving me in my cell, and the station out of action. I couldn't let it happen that way.

"Fortunately, Gibbon really was pretending to use his tool, not just waving it around. He didn't want to risk Dulcie's suspicion, not yet. I begged him to let me out. He didn't laugh at me, or anything like that. He just ignored me. I whined and sniveled so that he worked harder at ignoring me.

"As he pretended to free me, he'd look over at the party. He knew Dulcie couldn't stay watching him the whole time. As soon as he saw she was away from the window, he'd take his cutter and go to sabotage the station. So, once, while he was checking for her, I reached up and looped a length of bed sheet around the cutting head of his tool, tying it to the bar. Seems almost dumb, doesn't it? But it was all I could think of. It worked even better than I thought it would. First he thought he'd just gotten stuck on something and yanked at it kind of absentmindedly. Then he realized it was tied on. And he couldn't reach the part where it was tied without reaching through the bars—and when he did that I jabbed his fingers with the end of a sharpened toothbrush. It wasn't all fun and games in Carcery, and I'd learned a thing or two while there. He swore at me, then promised to leave the station alone, then told me Dulcie loved me.

"I didn't believe anything he said, even though I wanted to, and we wrestled back and forth. Time was running out for him. He could only stay up there for so long before being seen. Finally, he took a risk. He let go and ran off to take care of the more important part of his job, sabotaging Carcery Station. After all, he hadn't been dumb enough to go up there with only one tool. Dulcie must have been taking a turn around the dance floor at that point. She was quite popular, and leaving too many slots on her dance card would have been suspicious.

"I untied the head and pulled the tool into my cell. I had better leverage than Gibbon had had balanced up top. The bars were old, not hardened, and it only took me a few minutes for me to get out of my cell. So, in a sense, Gibbon had done exactly what he'd told Dulcie he was going to do: he'd freed me." He looked up. "Let's take the left switch here, Mr. Andrew. As it is your first time, I will assist."

Arabella gauged directions. "Is this getting us home?"

"Eventually," Pardo said. "But it is getting you a light first. Isn't that what you're after?"

"Yes!" Andrew was still excited. "What do you have?"

"I guarantee that you will not be disappointed."

Arabella was uneasily conscious that Andrew would bear most of the cost of their truancy. She was leaving tomorrow. He was staying. But if he showed no sign of hesitation, who was she to introduce reality?

"So you got out and attacked him," Andrew said, once they were on the new line. "Just like in the picture."

"Ah. Yes. I was full of rage. I should just have grabbed his hanger and gone off to get help. But he'd humiliated me, taken advantage of the trusting Dulcie, and was now trying to destroy all I had worked for. He saw me coming and was ready to fight. We battled on the station, balanced above the square. Even with the advantage of surprise, it wasn't easy. He was a tough opponent. I'd finally gotten the advantage

and was about to knock him down. But . . . I had forgotten that we were in full view of the ball. And every waiter at that party was a telpherman. The Spider Monkeys dropped their trays and tablecloths and swarmed across the square to help their threatened leader. Everyone else followed."

"It was magnificent. It was a disaster. The wait staff was virtually all of the telphermen in the city, and no one was going to be left out of the fun. They all joined in: Ball Court & Place Auto Da Fé, the Maidan Mainline, even Tarpeian Rock, Mt. Taygetus & Gehenna, the ash-and-bone line that carried no living passengers. It was the last hurrah of the independent lines. The station went down. Hann's entire enterprise collapsed that night as well, and he lost his business." He leaned back. "All right, young man. We are home. Release the grip, and we'll drift in against the arresters."

Andrew did as he was bid, and it worked smoothly this time. They moved slowly through a set of doors, and into a large open warehouse area, full of dangling telpher cars, coils of cable, and steam engine boilers. This must have been the central telpher car barn, where all the remaining cars were coming to be decommissioned, and most likely destroyed. A few men worked desultorily on the floor far below, stacking parts on pallets.

Pardo led them up a set of stairs to a separate structure on top of the car barn,

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past a vast sea of fabric that looked like it had been purchased at the Balloon Market. Several workers, detached from car duty below, seemed to be rolling it up.

Arabella half expected a luxurious aerie of some sort, with rich fabrics and artworks, but it was, instead, a functional space, like the bridge of a ship. She could see Pardo's cot, the blankets neat and tight on it. A battered enamel coffee cup and plate stood on the drain board. He seemed to be one of those men who could survive on canned fish, dry bread, and cheese, with an occasional glass of red wine to get him through the night. Whatever luxuries he had risked his career for as a young man were far from his mind now.

But he was packing up, just as Arabella was at home. Boxes stood in a row under the windows. A thick canvas hose snaked across the floor and out through the rear somewhere, where a motor rumbled. Sometimes it got a bit louder, and people would shout outside, as they worked on something.

"Let's see what you have." Pardo pointed to a chart table which held engineering drawings: plans for expansion, modification, and improvement that had never come to pass. Arabella could see elaborate planetary gears, cable self-tensioners, umbrella holders, and tiny stoves to heat passengers' feet in midwinter. Calculations in Pardo's fine hand spidered around the diagrams.

After a moment's hesitation, Andrew unwrapped his prize and pulled the newspaper aside.

Pardo looked down at the fat electrode and sighed, "Ah. That's it. Dulcie's long-life blend. Hann never knew what he had in that girl."

"Where's the lamp you propose to trade?" Andrew said.

Pardo frowned, suddenly irritated by this importunate boy. Then he took a deep breath with his eyes closed.

"Just one more thing. I was going to slip out of town, go, I don't know, somewhere. Steamship work, like Gibbon. Inclined mountain railways. High-speed subterranean pneumo-airships. Plenty of systems needed good management help. But Dulcie found me, in the little room where I hid out. I thought at first that she was there to finally confess her love for me, that Gibbon had actually been telling the truth. But she spoke quickly, before I could really embarrass myself. In fact . . . she had a little accounting problem, needed a way of estimating a system's useful life. This may not seem like a tempting treat to you, something to make you betray your dreams. But it had always been an issue in financing the business. The lines had started out with recycled equipment, carriages, steam engines designed to run drainage pumps, mine shaft cables and wheels, kiosks from defunct theaters. It was all wearing out, and no one had been carrying replacement costs properly. Capital budgets were a mess. You know, you haven't truly solved a problem unless you know how much the solution costs.

"I had something of a reputation right then. I'd gone face to face with Gibbon, the greatest of the telpher saboteurs. I hadn't defeated him, but I had given as good as I had gotten. The telphermen were willing to follow me, if I could reconfigure and revive the lines. And I did it. I worked and worked, and eventually kept them together. Until now."

From this point, you could see many of the lines that had once hung like a spider web over the city. They were still now, without their scurrying cars. Soon they would come down and be forgotten.

"And Dulcie?" Arabella said, when she could stand it no longer.

"Ah, of course. She's who interests you. And I wish I could tell you more. I made her an offer, of course." He smiled, not happily, at the look on Arabella's face. "Not the one you're thinking of. An engineering position. Not chief. She wasn't experienced enough yet. There was no way for her to know all the demanding tasks that have nothing to do with thinking up clever devices. But a senior position. She said no. She had other things she wanted to do."

"It was only a while afterward that I thought that, maybe, this was what she had been after the entire time. A release from everything. She disappeared from the city and traveled the world. She finished her formal education in several engineering faculties abroad. No one expected her to do anything, there was no one she needed to marry. She was, unlike the rest of us, free." He glanced at Andrew, who was looking irritably out of the window, not really listening to the story. "You've been patient for long enough."

Pardo reached behind his chart table and pulled out the light. It had half a dozen multiply jointed legs with some kind of counterweighting. Pardo shook it and threw it against a support column. The legs swung wildly until their motion was obstructed by something. Then they wrapped around it, and clung like a koala. He walked over and showed how a variety of lenses could make the light spread or focus, or change its color, or even project an image on a distant building.

Neither Andrew nor Arabella knew what to say. It was perfect.

But it was Andrew who had to give up his electrode to get it.

She glanced at him, but he wasn't looking at the electrode. He was looking at the engraving. "Dulcie drew this, right?"

"Yes."

He put his finger on the battle between the cloaked figure and Gibbon. "This seems like a poor choice. Attacking him like this. I mean, you had only one chance. Gibbon was a dangerous man."

"And I was an office clerk?"

"Most of us aren't actually people in stories."

If Pardo had stuck with his version, there was no way either of them could have found any evidence that things had happened other than as he had described, but, finally, he had some odd devotion to truth. "Of course we aren't. I'm certainly not. And wasn't then. He had at least a foot of reach on me, and I'd seen him take on three opponents at once. Gribbins . . . Gibbon . . . was someone you had to have met. You don't know even the smallest part of his story. As you said, I had only the one chance. So I wrapped myself in what was left of my sheets, carried the bar cutter up behind him as he worked, and coshed him. He went right down, so I got that right, at least."

There were more shouts outside. Whatever was happening was part of the order of business, because Pardo just smiled a bit.

"Dulcie knew that wouldn't get me the cooperation I needed to make the business a success, so she . . . reinterpreted it for me. And she'd really liked Gibbon. But she knew the way things worked, so she's the one who made the story 'The man who defeated Gibbon' was never what I relied on. I just didn't need extra resistance as I made the decisions that needed to be made."

"And what are you going to do now?" Andrew said, with something like concern in his voice. "Now that there are no lines?"

"I have new work. The desert balloon ways need some business skills. I've actually been studying their problems for some time. There are ways to improve their operations. Which is interesting, because their operations really make little sense."

"When?" Arabella said.

"As soon as we can wind up our negotiations here. I'm looking forward to it. It's really time for a change. Of course, if you look at your life closely enough, it's always time for a change."

As Andrew engaged the grip, Arabella looked back at the car barn roof where Pardo had lived for so many years. "Do you really think . . . look at that!"

"What?" Andrew craned to see behind him.

A gigantic shape loomed over Pardo's rooftop structure. For a moment, Arabella tried to interpret it as something far away, some weirdly symmetrical storm cloud.

It was a balloon. She'd seen the fabric on the roof, even recognized it for what it was, but not connected it with the later noises she'd heard. The crew must have been inflating it and getting it into place the entire time she and Andrew had been listening to Pardo's story inside.

She saw several people on the rooftop now, hauling boxes and cases into the gondola.

The wind had risen, and the car rocked on its cables. Dark clouds rose far off to the east. Below them, the Indigo Hills glowed with the light of the setting sun. The balloon strained at the lines that held it down. Then, all at once, they released, and the balloon rose up.

"Tell me what's going on," Andrew said. "I have to pay attention to this."

"Pardo's taking off in a balloon," Arabella said. "But wait, he's not climbing much, just moving with the wind . . . he's coming this way. He's tethered to the telpher line!"

A small gondola dangled below the gigantic, mesh-encased balloon. The line that held it to the telpher line was taut. The balloon swelled behind them, and, despite herself, Arabella crouched a little, feeling it was going to crush them under its bulk.

But of course its bulk was negative. It was straining against the telpher cable, pulling it up in a direction it was never meant to go. It passed over them, pulling them up after it. Then it was past, and there was a sickening moment of weightlessness as they dropped. The car thumped down, then shook on the line. But the support wheels did not bounce off the static cable, and they continued to move.

Just beyond, the balloon released the pulley that had held it down to the cable. The pulley dropped to the ground, far below, and the balloon sailed into the sky.

"Where is he going?" Arabella said. "Now that he's unhooked he can't really control that thing."

"He's just hoping for luck, or he's off toward the ocean . . . wait!" Andrew squinted ahead. "I think I know. There's an old tethered balloon track in the Indigo Hills. Nowadays they're only in the desert, but there was a quarry there once. He must be trying for that."

As they watched, Pardo reeled in the line. Then, a moment later, he lowered it again. Something else dangled at its end now.

"See?" Andrew said. "That's a balloon bogey. It's supposed to snap into the track. But he's sliding too far!"

A gust from the left had blown the balloon sidewise. Pardo reeled the line in part-way, swung it back and forth a couple of times, then released it. It bounced off the rocks and dragged behind the balloon uselessly. He pulled it up again, patiently swung it, threw it again . . . and this time it caught. Somewhere down there was a track slot that had once guided the balloons that floated slabs of rock down to the barges in the river.

Anchored firmly to its track, the balloon swept off, putting out fins to catch the wind. They watched as it crossed the hills and dropped out of sight.

Just as it did, there was a purple-white flash of lightning.

The clouds were dark, but it didn't look like a storm. Another flash.

"The light!" Andrew said. "Dulcie's light. He's installed the electrode. He must have already gotten everything together."

It flashed irregularly a few more times, the magnetite/titanium arc a distinct purple-white. "Does he have a bad connection?" Arabella said.

"Not at all." Andrew was now placid. He patted the light they had acquired. "It's code. I don't even need to look it up. It's a telpher message from the old days, though usually they sent it by tapping on a cable: 'Line up, pressure up, beer glass up.' I wish I could signal back. Farewell, Pardo."

As they descended to the city, the balloon disappeared behind the hills, and it was night. O

# BALLAD OF THE WARBOTS

I went into the power'-ouse to get a jolt o' watts  
The publican, 'e up an' sez "We don't serve no warbots."

The AI mixing drinks, it giggled fit to die.  
I clanked into the street again an' to myself sez I:

O it's Robbie this an' Robbie that, an'  
"Turn it off, the brute!"  
But it's "Savior of its planet," when  
The ray-guns start to shoot.

Yes, makin' mock o' warbots that guard you while you're juiced  
Is cheaper than them warbots, an' they are mass produced.  
An' hackin' into robots when they're off-line an' powered down  
Is five times better business than invadin' Martian ground.

Then it's Robbie this an' Robbie that, an'  
Robbie do as bade,  
But it's "tin-clad line of heroes" when  
The aliens invade.

We aren't no tin-clad 'eroes, nor we aren't no monsters too  
But appliances of honor, most remarkable like you.  
An' if sometimes we're buggy an' our programs get confused,  
We're not to blame for thinking that the aliens are youse.

For it's Robbie this an' Robbie that, an'  
Don't point that thing at me.  
But afterward it's silence for as far  
As eye can see.

—Jack O'Brien



If the multiverse contains all possible worlds, than perhaps some comfort can be found in . . .

# AN EMPTY HOUSE WITH MANY DOORS

Michael Swanwick

**T**he television set is upside down. I need its company while I clean, but not its distraction. Sipping gingerly at a glass of wine, I vacuum the oriental rugs one-handed, with great care. Ah, Katherine, you'd be amazed the job I've done. The house has never been so clean.

I put the vacuum cleaner back in the closet. Cleanup takes next to no time at all since I eliminated all the unneeded furniture.

Rugs done, I'm about to get out the floor polish when it occurs to me that trash pickup is tomorrow. Humming, I roll up the carpets one by one, tie them with string, carry all three out to the curb. Then, since it's no longer needed, I set the vacuum cleaner beside them.

Back in the house, the living room is all but empty, the dried and bleached bones of our life picked clean of meat and memories. One surviving chair, the television, and a collapsible tray I've used since discarding the dining room table. The oven timer goes off; the pot pies are ready. I get out the plate, knife, and fork, slide out the pies, and throw away the foil roasting tray. I wipe the stove door with a damp rag, rinse the rag, wring it out and put it away. Pour myself another glass of wine.

The television gibbers and shouts at me as I eat. People hang upside down, like bats. They scuttle across the ceiling, smiling insanely. The news bimbo is chatting up the latest disaster, mouth an inverted crescent. Somebody in a woodpecker suit is bashing his head into the bed of a pickup truck, over and over again. Is all this supposed to mean something? Was it ever?

The wine in my glass is half-gone already. Making good time tonight. All of a sudden the bad feelings well up, like a gusher of misery. I squeeze my eyes shut, screwing my face tight, but somehow the tears seep through, and I'm sobbing. Crying uncontrollably, because while I'm still thinking about you, while I never do and never can stop thinking about you, it's getting harder and harder to remember what you looked like. It's going away from me. Oh Katherine, I'm losing your face!

No self pity. I won't give in to it. I get out the mop and fill a bucket with warm water and ammonia detergent. Swabbing as hard as I can, I start to clean the floors. Until finally, it's under control. I top off my glass, take a sip, feel the wine burning in my belly. Drinking like this will kill a man, sooner or later. Which is why I work at it so hard.

I'm teaching myself how to die.

\*\*\*

If I don't get some fresh air, I'll pass out. If I pass out, I'll drink less. Timing is all. I get my coat, walk out the door. Wibbley-wobbly, down the hill I go. Past the row houses and corner hoagie shops, the chocolate factory and the gas station, under the railroad bridge and along the canal, all the way down into Manayunk. The wine is buzzing in my head, but still the traitor brain dwells on you, a droning monologue on pain and loss and yearning. If only I'd kept you home that day. If only I'd only fucking only. Even I'm sick of hearing it. I lift up and above it, until conscious thought is just a drear mumble underfoot and I soar up godlike in the early evening air.

How you loved Manayunk, its old mill buildings, tumbledown collieries, and blue-collar residences. The yuppies have gentrified Main Street, but three blocks uphill from it the people haven't changed a bit; still hardheaded, suspicious, good neighbors. I float through the narrow streets, to the strip of trendy little restaurants on Main. My head swells and balloons and my feet barely touch the ground. I pass through the happy evening crowd, attached to the earth by the most tenuous of tethers. I'd sever it if I could, and simply float away.

Then I see the man strangling in midair.

Nobody else can see him. They stride purposefully by, some even walking through the patch of congealed air that, darkly sparkling, contains his struggling figure.

He is twisting in slow agony on a frame of chrome bars, like a fly dying on a spider's web. The outlines of his distorted body are prismatic at the edges, like a badly tuned video. He is drowning in dirty rainbows. His body is a cubist nightmare, torso shattered into overlapping planes, limbs scattered through nine dimensions. The head swings around, eyes multiplying and being swallowed up by flesh, and then there is a flash of desperate hope as he realizes I can see him. He reaches toward me, outflung arm spreading through a fan of possibilities. Caught in jellied air, dark and sparkling, his body shattered into strangely fractured planes.

Mouth opens in a silent scream, and through some form of sympathetic magic the faintest distant echoes of his pain sound a whispering screech of fingernails across the back of my skull.

I know a man who is drowning when I see one. People are scurrying about, some right through the man. They glance at me oddly, standing there, frozen on the sidewalk. I reach up and take his

!

hand.

*It hurts.* It hurts like a sonofabitch. I feel like I've been hit with a two-by-four. One side of my body goes completely numb. I am slammed sideways, thought whiting out under sheets of hard white pain, and it is a blessing because for the first time since you died, oh most beloved, I stop thinking about you.

When I come to, I draw myself together, stand up. I haven't moved, but the street is empty and dark. Must be late at night. Which is crazy, because people wouldn't just leave me lying there. It's not that kind of neighborhood. So why did they? It doesn't bear thinking about.

I stand up, and there, beside me, is the man's corpse.

He's dressed in a kind of white jumpsuit, with little high-tech crap scattered all over it. A badge on his chest with a fan of arrows branching out, diverging from a single point. I look at him. Dead, poor bastard, and nothing I can do about it.

I need another drink.

Home again, home again, trudge trudge trudge. As I approach the house, something is wrong, though. There are curtains in the windows, and orange light spills out. If I were a normal man, I'd be apprehensive, afraid, fearful of housebreakers and psychopaths. There's nothing I'd be less likely to do than go inside.

I go inside.

Someone is rattling pans in the kitchen. Humming. "Is that you, love?"

I stand there, inside the living room, trembling with something more abject than fear. It's the kind of curdling terror you might feel just before God walks into the room. No, I say to myself, don't even think it.

You walk into the room.

"That didn't take long," you say, amused. "Was the store closed?" Then, seeing me clear, alarm touches your face, and you say "Johnny?"

I'm trembling. You reach out a hand and touch me, and it's like a world of ice breaking up inside, and I start to cry. "Love, what's *wrong*?"

Which is when I walk into the room.

Again.

The two of me stare at each other. At first, to be honest, I don't make the connection. I just think: There's something odd about this man. Strangest damn guy I ever did see, and I can't figure out why. All those movies and television shows where somebody is suddenly confronted by his exact double and goes slack-jawed with shock? Lies, the batch of them. He doesn't look a bit like the way I picture myself.

"Johnny?" you say in a strangled little voice. But you're not looking at me but at the other guy and he's staring at me in a bemused kind of way, as if there's something strange and baffling about *me*, and then all of a sudden the dime drops.

He's me.

He's me and he's not getting it anymore than I was. "Katherine?" he says. "Who is this?"

A very long evening later, I find myself lying on the couch under a blanket with pillows beneath my head. Upstairs, you and the other me are arguing. His voice is low and angry. Yours is calm and reasonable, but he doesn't like what it says. It was my wallet that convinced you: the driver's license identical to his in every way, the credit and library and insurance cards, all the incidental pieces of identification one picks up along the way, and every single one of them exactly the same as his.

Save for the fact that his belong to a man whose wife is still alive.

I don't know exactly what you're saying up there, but I can guess at the emotional heart of it. You love me. This is, in a sense, my house. I have nowhere else to go. You are not about to turn me out.

Meanwhile, I—the me upstairs, I mean—am angry and unhappy about my being here at all. He knows me better than you do, and he doesn't like me one tenth as much. Knowing that there's no way you could tell us apart, he is filled with paranoid fantasies. He's afraid I'm going to try to take his place.

Which, if I could, I most certainly would. But that would probably require my killing him and I'm not sure I could actually kill a man. Even if that man was myself. And how could I possibly hope to square it with you? I'm in uncharted territory here. I have no idea what might or might not happen.

For now, though, it's enough to simply hear your voice. I ignore the rest and close my eyes and smile.

A car rumbles down the road outside and then abruptly stops. As do the voices above. All other noises cease as sharply as if somebody has thrown a switch.

Puzzled, I get up from the couch.

Out of nowhere, strong hands seize my arms. There's a man standing to the right of me and another to the left. They both wear white jumpsuits, which I understand now to be a kind of uniform. They wear the same badge—a fan of arrows radiant from a common locus—as the man I saw strangling in the air.

"We're sorry, sir," says one. "We saw you trying to help our comrade, and we appreciate that. But you're in the wrong place and we have to put you back."

"You're time travelers or something, aren't you?" I ask.

"Or something," the second one says. He's holding onto my right arm. With his free hand he opens a kind of pod floating in the air beside him. An equipment bag, I think. It's filled with devices which seem to be only half there. A gleaming tube wraps itself around my chest, another around my forehead. "But don't worry. We'll have everything set right in just a jiff."

Then I twig to what's going on.

"No," I say. "She's *here*, don't you understand that? I'll keep my mouth shut, I won't say anything to anyone ever, I swear. Only let me stay. I'll move to another city, I won't bother anybody. The two upstairs will think they had some kind of shared hallucination. Only please, for God's sake, let me exist in a world where Katherine's not dead."

There is a terrible look of compassion in the man's eyes. "Sir. If it were possible, we would let you stay."

"Done," says the other. The world goes away.

So I return to my empty house. I pour myself a glass of wine and stare at it for a long, long time. Then I get up and pour it into the sink.

A year passes.

It's night and I'm standing in our tiny urban backyard, Katherine, looking up at the stars and a narrow sliver of moon. Talking to you. I know you can't hear me. But I've been thinking about that strange night ever since it happened, and it seems to me that in an infinite universe, all possibilities are manifest in an eternal present. Somewhere you're happy, and that makes me glad. In countless other places, you're a widow and heartbroken. Surely one of you at least is standing out in the backyard, like I am now, staring up at the moon and imagining that I'm saying these words. Which is why I'm here. So it will be true.

I don't really have much to say, I'm afraid. I just want you to know I still love you and that I'm doing fine. I wasn't, for a while there. But just knowing you're alive somehow, however impossibly far away, is enough to keep me going.

You're never really dead, I know that now.

And if it makes you feel any better, neither am I. ○

## Monsters of the Stratosphere

It's been a long time  
since any stalwart hero  
wearing jodhpurs, flying cap, and goggles  
landed a biplane on the Heaviside Layer,  
as if in a cloudy field,  
to battle tentacled, voracious fiends  
from beyond the sky;  
and the Moon these days  
in all its pits and hollows,  
no longer harbors giant bugs.  
Mars, cold, dry, almost airless, awaits,  
quite free of throats, Tharks, and rampaging Warhoons.

But the monsters are still there,  
just lurking a little further out  
into the eternal Dark,  
their eyes agleam among the myriad stars,  
like wolves beyond a campfire, waiting;  
and the courage required to face them  
is just the same.

—Darrell Schweitzer

Mike Resnick is the winner of five Hugos from a record thirty-four nominations, most of which have appeared in *Asimov's*. His current books are *The Buntline Special* and *Blasphemy*, and *The Doctor and the Kid* will be out later this year. Mike has been announced as the Guest of Honor at the 2012 Worldcon in Chicago. In his latest tale for *Asimov's*, Mike takes a candid look at family relationships and notes how difficult it sometimes is for parents and children to find common ground, and just how painful and fraught can be . . .

# THE HOMECOMING

Mike Resnick

I don't know which bothers me more, my lumbago or my arthritis. One day it's one, one day it's the other. They can cure cancer and transplant every damned organ in your body; you'd think they could find some way to get rid of aches and pains. Let me tell you, growing old isn't for sissies.

I remember that I was having a typical dream. Well, typical for me, anyway. I was climbing the four steps to my front porch, only when I got to the third step there were six more, so I climbed them and then there were ten more, and it went on and on. I'd probably still be climbing them if the creature hadn't woken me up.

It stood next to my bed, staring down at me. I blinked a couple of times, trying to focus my eyes, and stared back, sure this was just an extension of my dream.

It was maybe six feet tall, its skin a glistening, almost metallic silver, with multi-faceted bright red eyes like an insect. Its ears were pointed and batlike, and moved independently of its head and each other. Its mouth jutted out a couple of inches like some kind of tube, and looked like it was only good for sucking fluids. Its arms were slender, with no hint of the muscles required to move them, and its fingers were thin and incredibly elongated. It was as weird a nightmare figure as I'd dreamed up in years.

Finally it spoke, in a voice that sounded more like a set of chimes than anything else.

"Hello, Dad," it said.

That's when I knew I was awake.

"So this is what you look like," I growled, swinging my feet over the side of the bed and sitting up. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm glad to see you too," he replied.

"You didn't answer my question," I said, feeling around for my slippers.

"I heard about Mom—not from you, of course—and I wanted to see her once more before the end."

"Can you see through those things?" I asked, indicating his eyes.

"Better than you can."

Big surprise. Hell, everyone can see better than I can.

"How did you get in here anyway?" I said as I got to my feet. The furnace was as old and tired as I was and there was a chill in the air, so I put on my robe.

"You haven't changed the front door's code words since I left." He looked around the room. "You haven't painted the place either."

"The lock's supposed to check your retinagram or read your DNA or something."

"It did. They haven't changed."

I looked him up and down. "The hell they haven't."

He seemed about to reply, then thought better of it. Finally he said, "How is she?"

"She has her bad days and her worse days," I answered. "She's the old Julia maybe two or three times a week for a minute or two, but that's all. She can still speak, and she still recognizes me." I paused. "She won't recognize *you*, of course, but nobody else you ever knew will either."

"How long has she been like this?"

"Maybe a year."

"You should have told me," he said.

"Why?" I asked. "You gave up being her son and became whatever it is you are now."

"I'm still her son, and you had my contact information."

I stared at him. "Well, you're not *my* son, not anymore."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he replied. Suddenly he sniffed the air. "It smells stale."

"Tired old houses are like tired old men," I said. "They don't function on all cylinders."

"You could move to a smaller, newer place."

"This house and me, we've grown old together. Not everyone wants to move to Alpha whatever-the-hell-it-is."

He looked around. "Where is she?"

"In your old room," I said.

He turned, walked out into the hall. "Haven't you replaced that thing yet?" he asked, indicating an old wall table. "It was scarred and wobbly when I still lived here."

"It's just a table. It holds whatever I put on it. That's all it has to do."

He looked up at the ceiling. "The paint's peeling too."

"I'm too old to do it myself, and painters cost money. I'm living on a fixed income."

He didn't reply to that, but walked down the hall and was fiddling with the door handle when I joined him.

"It's locked," he said.

"Sometimes she gets up and goes out for a walk, and then can't remember how to get back home." I grimaced. "I can probably keep her here another few months, but then she's going to have to move into a special care facility."

I uttered the code word and the door opened.

Julia was propped up on her pillows, staring at a blank holoscreen across the room, unmindful of a lock of gray hair that had worked its way loose and obscured her left eye's vision. The channel she was on had finished broadcasting for the night, but it didn't make any difference to her. She was content watching the flickering gray cube.

I ordered the bed lamp to turn on and gently pinned her hair back up. Now that the room was illuminated, I could see our son staring at it. The holographs of him when he played on the high school basketball team were still on the wall, as well as

the one of him in his tux at the prom, and his trophy for winning the science contest remained atop the dresser, though it needed dusting. Just above it was his framed diploma from college. Lining the walls were other photos and holographs, from when he was still a baby until a month before he'd undergone what Julia always referred to as his Change. I could see his face twitching as he looked around at the memorabilia of his youth, and I felt like I could almost read his thoughts: *They've turned the damned place into a shrine.* Which I suppose we had—but to what he had been, not to what he was now. And I'd moved her in here because she was comforted by things from the past, even things she could no longer name.

"Hello, Jordan," said Julia, smiling at me. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Julia. Do you mind if I turn off the holo?"

"I was enjoying it," she said. "How are you?"

I ordered the screen to deactivate.

"Is it August yet?" she asked.

"No, Julia," I said patiently. "It's February, just like it was yesterday."

"Oh," she said, frowning. "I thought it might be August." Then a friendly smile. "How are you?"

Suddenly our son stepped forward. "Hello, Mother."

She stared at him and smiled. "You are really quite beautiful."

He reached out and took her hand with those incredibly long, stick-like fingers before I could stop him.

"I've missed you, Mother," he said. He seemed like he was choked with emotion, but I couldn't tell, because his voice never changed from those musical chimes. It was so unlike a human voice that I don't know how we were able to understand him, but somehow we did.

"It is Halloween already?" asked Julia. "Are you dressed for a party?"

"No, Mother. This is the way I look."

"Well, I think you're beautiful." She stopped and frowned. "Do I know you?"

He smiled, sadly I thought. "You did once. I am your son."

She was silent for a moment, and I knew she was trying to remember. "I think I had a little boy once, but I can't recall his name."

"My name is Philip."

"Philip . . . Philip . . ." she repeated. Finally she shook her head. "No, I think it was Jordan."

"Jordan is your husband," said Philip. "I'm your son."

"I think I had a little boy once," she said. Her face went blank for a moment. Then: "Is it Halloween already?"

"No," he said gently. "I'll let you go back to sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

"That will be fine," she said. "Do I know you?"

"I'm your son," he said.

"I'm sure I had a son a long time ago," she said. "How are you?"

I could see a crystal tear run down his silver cheek. He tenderly laid her hand on the bed and stepped back. I activated the holoscreen, found a station that was still transmitting, killed the sound, and left her staring happily at it as I followed Philip out into the hall, locking the door behind me.

We walked to the cluttered kitchen, with its ancient appliances and the three cracked tiles on the floor. (Each of us had been responsible for one of them.) I found the room homey and comforting, but I saw him looking at a burn spot on a counter that had been there since he'd accidentally made it as a kid and for just an instant I felt guilty about never having fixed it.

"You should have told me about her," he said when he'd gotten his emotions under control.

"You shouldn't have left, or become whatever it is that you are."

"Damn it, she's my mother!" The chimes were louder; I assumed he was yelling or snapping.

"There was nothing you could have done." I ordered the refrigerator door to open and pulled out a beer. "You want one before you go back to wherever the hell you came from?" I thought about it and frowned. "Can you drink human drinks?"

He didn't answer, but walked over and grabbed a beer. I could see that his mouth wouldn't be able to accommodate the container, so I just watched and waited for him to ask for a glass, or maybe a bowl. He knew I was staring at him, but it didn't seem to bother him. Instead something—not a tongue, and not quite a straw—slid out of his mouth, and when it was a few inches long he inserted it into the top of the container. He swallowed a few seconds later, and I knew he was somehow getting the beer into his mouth.

He set the container down and stared at an old pennant I had stuck on the wall when he was a little boy.

"You're still a Pythons fan," he observed.

"Always."

"How are they doing?" There was a time when he actually cared, but that was many years ago.

"They haven't had a decent quarterback since Christ was a corporal," I answered.

"But you root for them anyway."

"You don't stop rooting for a team just because they've fallen on hard times."

"A team, or a parent," he said. I didn't know how to reply to that, so I remained silent, and after a moment he spoke again. "I know there are medications for Alzheimer's. I assume you've tried them?"

"There are all kinds of senile dementias. They call them all Alzheimer's, but they aren't. They haven't yet found out how to cure the one she's got."

"There are specialists on other worlds. Maybe one of them could have done something."

"You're the space traveler," I said bitterly. "Where were you when she might have been cured?"

He stared at me. I stared back, determined not to look away first.

"Why are you so angry at me? I know you cared for me once. I've never hurt you, I never took a penny from you once I got out of college, I never—"

"You deserted us," I said. "You deserted your mother, you deserted me, you deserted your planet, you even deserted your species. That poor woman down the hall can't remember the name of her son, but she can remember that people only look like you at Halloween."

"It's my job, damn it!"

"There are thousands of exobiologists right here on Earth!" I snapped. "I only know of one who turned into a silver-skinned monster with red eyes."

"I was offered an opportunity that has been afforded very few men and women," he replied. "I took it." Even with the chimes he couldn't keep the resentment out of his voice. "Most fathers would have been proud."

I stared at him for a moment, amazed that he still didn't understand. "I'm supposed to be proud that you became a *thing* that hasn't got a trace of humanity left in him?" I said at last.

He stared right back through those multi-faceted insect eyes. "You really believe there is nothing human left of me?" he asked curiously.

"Look in a mirror," I told him.

"Don't I remember you telling me back when I was a boy that you should never judge a book by its cover?"

"That's right."

"Well?" he said.

"I just saw one of your pages slide out and suck up the beer."

He sighed deeply, to the delicate tinkling of chimes. "Would you have been happier if I couldn't drink it?"

I seriously considered it for a minute. "No, that wouldn't have made me happier," I told him when I'd formulated my answer in terms even he could understand. "You know what would have made me happier? Grandchildren. A son who visited us for Christmas. A son I could leave the house to now that it's finally paid off. I never asked you to follow in my footsteps, attend my college, go into my business, even live in this town. Would expecting you to *want* to be a normal human being be so god-damned wrong for a father?"

"No, it wouldn't," he admitted. Then: "For better or worse you've lived *your* life. I have the right to live *mine*."

I shook my head. "Your life ended eleven years ago. You're living some alien creature's life now."

He cocked his head to one side and studied me curiously. It seemed almost bird-like. "Which bothers you more—that I left Earth, or that I became what I am?"

"Six of one, a half dozen of the other. You knew you were the center of your mother's life, but you left her and went to the far end of the galaxy."

"Not quite the far end," he said, and I couldn't tell from the chimes whether that was sarcastic or sardonic or simply a straight answer. "And my mother wouldn't have wanted me to stay *here* when I wanted to be out *there*."

"You broke her heart!" I snapped.

"If I did, then I am truly sorry."

"She spent years wondering *why*, back when she could still wonder," I continued. "So did I. You had so much promise and so many opportunities, damn it! You could have been anything you wanted! The sky was the limit!"

"I became what I wanted," he said gently. "And the stars were *my* limit."

"Damn it, Philip!" I said, though I had promised myself never to call him by his human name. "You could have spent your whole life here and never seen a thousandth of the things Earth has to offer."

"That's true. But others have already seen them." He paused, and turned his palms up in a very human gesture. "I wanted to see things no one else had ever seen."

"I don't know what's up there," I said, "but how different can it be? What makes *our* mountains and deserts and rivers so boring for you?"

He sighed, a delicate high-pitched tinkling sound. "I tried to explain that to you eleven years ago," he answered at last. "You didn't understand then. You don't understand now." He paused. "Maybe you just can't."

"Probably not," I agreed. I walked to the cabinet with the missing knob, and opened the door with my fingernails the way I always did.

"You still haven't replaced the knob," he observed. "I remember the day I pulled it off. I expected to be punished. You just laughed, like I'd done something cute."

"You should have seen the expression on your face when it came away in your hand, like you thought I'd send you off to prison." I felt a smile fighting to reach my mouth, and I pushed it back. "Anyway, it still opens." I reached in, pulled down a couple of small bottles, and put them in my pocket.

"Mother's medication?"

I nodded, holding them up. "She gets four different kinds in the morning, and two at night. I'll give them to her a little later." I pulled out another bottle.

"I thought you just said she only got two pills at night."

"She does," I said. I held up the third bottle. "These are sugar pills. I leave them on the dresser for her."

"Sugar pills?" he repeated with what I assume passed for a puzzled frown.

"She thinks she can still medicate herself. She can't, of course, but this gives her the illusion that she can. And if she takes six one day and forgets to take any the next, it doesn't make any difference."

"That's very thoughtful of you."

"I've loved her for close to half a century," I answered. "I could have put her in a home and just visited her every day—or every tenth day. She probably wouldn't know the difference. But I do this because I love her. Even if she doesn't know it, she has to be more comfortable in her own home, surrounded by the bits and pieces of her life. That's why I moved her to your room instead of the guest room; the photos, the trophies, even that old catcher's mitt in the closet, that's all she has left of you." I glared at him. "I didn't walk out of her life for eleven years and come back only when she was past remembering me."

He just looked at me but made no reply.

"Damn it!" I snapped. "Couldn't you have said it was a secret mission for the military, even if it was a lie?"

"You'd have found out soon enough that I was lying."

"I wouldn't have *tried* to! We'd have been proud that you were serving your country, or your planet, or whatever the hell you were serving."

"Is that it?" he demanded, suddenly angry. "You could lose a son to another world as long he didn't enjoy it, as long as someone might be shooting at him?"

"That's not what I said," I replied defensively.

"That's precisely what you said." He stared at me with those insect eyes for a long minute. "You would never have understood. *She* might have, but you wouldn't."

"Then why did you never tell her?"

"I tried."

"Well, you sure as hell didn't succeed," I said bitterly. "And it's too late to try again."

"*She's* not the one who hates me," he said. "I had already moved out and started my own life when this opportunity arose. You make it sound like I was your support network. I was an independent adult, living six states away from you." He paused. "I still don't know which bothers you more: that I left the planet at all, or that I left it looking like *this*."

"One day you were a member of our family. Four months later you weren't even a member of the human race."

"I still am," he insisted.

"Look in a mirror."

He placed a twelve-inch-long forefinger to his head. "It's what's in *here* that counts."

"They say the eyes are the windows to the soul," I replied. "Yours belong on an insect."

"Just what the hell did you want from me?" he demanded. "Did you want me to go into business with you?"

"No, of course not."

"Would you have disowned me if I'd been sterile and couldn't give you any grandchildren?"

"Don't be silly."

"What if I'd moved halfway around the world? I might not have seen you more than once a decade if I had. Would you have disowned me as you did eleven years ago?"

"Nobody disowned you," I pointed out, trying to keep my temper. "You disowned us."

He sighed deeply. At least I think he did. With those chimes I couldn't be sure.

"Did you ever think to ask me *why*?" he said at last.

"No."

"If it bothered you that much, why didn't you?"

"Because it was your choice."

I think he frowned. I couldn't tell for certain, not with that face. "I don't understand."

"If it was a necessity, something you had to do to save your life or something like that, I'd have asked. But since it was a freely made choice, no, I didn't care *why* you did it, only *that* you did it."

He looked long and hard at me. "All those years that I lived here, and even after I left, I thought you loved me."

"I loved *Philip*," I said, and then grimaced. "I don't know *you*."

Suddenly I heard Julia knocking weakly at her door, and walked down the shop-worn hallway to unlock it. I hadn't noticed how threadbare the carpet had become, or the crack in the plaster, but I saw *him* looking at it so I looked too, and made up my mind to do something about the house one of these days.

I uttered the code word, softly enough that she couldn't hear it on her side of the door, and a moment later it swung open. She was standing there barefoot in her nightgown, thin and frail, her arms and legs like toothpicks with withered flesh on them, looking mildly puzzled.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I thought I heard you arguing with someone." Her gaze fell on Philip. "Hello," she said. "Have we met before?"

He took her hand very gently and gave her what seemed like a wistful smile, though I couldn't be sure. "A long time ago."

"My name is Julia." She extended a wrinkled, liver-spotted hand.

"And mine is Philip."

A frown crossed her once-beautiful face. "I think I knew someone called Philip once." She paused, then smiled. "That's a very pretty costume you're wearing."

"Thank you."

"And I love your voice," she continued. "It sounds like the wind chimes on our porch when a summer breeze blows through them."

"I'm glad it pleases you," said the creature that used to be our son.

"Can you sing?"

He shrugged, and his whole body seemed to sparkle as the light reflected off it. "I really don't know," he admitted. "I've never tried."

"You look hungry," she said. "Can I make you something to eat?"

I prodded him and when he looked at me, I very briefly shook my head No. She'd already set the kitchen on fire twice before I started ordering all our meals delivered.

He picked up on it instantly. "No, thank you. I ate just before I arrived."

"That's too bad," she said. "I'm a good cook."

"I'll bet you make a wonderful Denver pudding." That had always been his favorite dessert.

"The best," she answered, glowing with pride. "I *like* you, young man." Then a puzzled frown. "You *are* a man, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Is it Halloween?"

"Not yet."

"Why are you wearing that costume, then?"

"Would you really like to know about it?"

"Very much," she said. Suddenly she shivered. "But it's chilly standing here bare-

foot in the doorway. Would you mind very much if I got under the covers while we chatted? You can sit right next to the bed, and we can be nice and cozy. Jordan, could you make me some hot chocolate? And maybe some for . . . I've forgotten your name."

"Philip," he said.

"Philip," she repeated, frowning. "Philip. I'm *sure* I knew a Philip once, a long time ago."

"I'm sure you did too," he said softly.

"Well, come along." Julia turned, walked back into her room, and climbed into the bed that had once belonged to Philip, propping herself up with some pillows and pulling the blanket and comforter up to her armpits. He followed her and stood next to the bed. "There's no need to stand, young man," she told him. "Pull up a chair."

"Thank you," he said, getting the chair he'd used while writing his master's thesis on his computer and carrying it over so that he was sitting right next to her.

"Jordan, I think we'd like some hot chocolate."

"I don't know if he drinks it," I replied.

"I'd very much like some," he said.

"Good!" said Julia. "You can bring two cups on a tray, one for me and one for . . . Excuse me, but I don't know your name."

"It's Philip."

"And you must call me Julia."

"Why don't I just call you Mother?" he suggested.

She frowned in puzzlement. "Why would you do that?"

He reached out and very gently held her hand. "No reason, Julia."

"Jordan," she said, "I think I'd like some hot chocolate." She turned to Philip. "Would you like some too, young man? You *are* a man, aren't you?"

"I am, and I would."

I left to get the hot chocolate before she asked again. I went out to the kitchen, mixed up a fair-sized pan—I don't know why; there were only two of them, and I don't drink the stuff myself—and was about to pour a pair of cups. Then I remembered the shape of his hands and fingers, and decided he was less likely to spill a mug, so I got the old chipped Pythons mug he'd given me for my birthday when he was nine or ten years old. I think he'd saved up a month's allowance to buy it. I looked at it fondly for a moment, and wondered if he'd recognize it. Then I remembered who—or rather *what*—I was pouring it for, and got on with it. The whole process took maybe three or four minutes, start to finish. I put the cup and the mug on a tray, added a spoon for Julia since she liked to stir everything whether it needed it or not, and folded a pair of napkins. Then I picked up the tray and carried it back to the bedroom.

"Just put it on the table, please, Jordan," she said, and I placed it on her nightstand.

She turned back eagerly to Philip. "What were they like?"

To this day I don't know how a face like his could look wistful, but it did. "They are the most beautiful things I've ever seen," he said, his voice chiming delicately. "I want to say they're transparent, but that's not exactly right. Their bodies are actually prisms, separating the rays of the sun and casting a hundred colors on the ground beneath them as they fly."

"They sound wonderful!" said Julia, her face more alive than I'd seen it in months.

"They swarm by the tens of thousands. It's as if a miles-long kaleidoscope has taken wing, and the ever-changing colors cover an area the size of a small city."

"How fascinating!" she said enthusiastically. "What do they eat?"

A shrug. "No one knows."

"No one?"

"There are only about forty men and women on the planet, and none of us has yet climbed the crystal mountains where they nest."

"Crystal mountains!" she repeated. "What a pretty picture!"

"It's not a world like any you have ever imagined, Julia," he said. "There are plants and animals no one's even dreamed of."

"Plants?" she asked. "How different can a plant be?"

"I saw some potted plants in your living room, right by that old piano that's probably still out of tune," he said. "Do you ever talk to them?"

"Of course," said Julia. She flashed him a smile. "But they never answer."

He returned her smile. "Mine do."

She clutched his hand with both of hers, as if she was afraid he might leave before telling her about his plants.

"What do they say?" she asked. "I'll bet they talk about the weather."

He shook his head. "Mostly they talk about mathematics, and once in a while about philosophy."

"I knew about those things once," she said, and then added hazily: "I think."

"They have no sense of self-preservation, so they're not concerned with rain or fertilizer," continued Philip. "They don't care if they're eaten or not. They use their intelligence to solve abstract problems, because to them *all* problems are abstract."

I couldn't help but speak up. "They really exist?"

"They really exist."

"What do they look like?"

"Not like any plant on Earth. Most of them have translucent flowers, and almost all have rigid protrusions, like, I don't know, tiny branches that rub together. That's how they communicate."

"So you speak in chimes and they speak in little clicks?" asked Julia. "How do you understand each other?"

"The first few men to study them spent half a century learning the meanings behind their clicking and rubbing. Now we both speak to my computer, and it translates each of our languages into the other's."

"What do you say to a plant?" I asked.

"Not much," he admitted. "They're very different. But after you speak to them for any length of time, you know why Men fight so hard to stay alive. Nothing *matters* to them. They accomplish nothing and they care about nothing, not even their mathematics. They have no hopes, no dreams, and no goals." He paused. "But they *are* unique."

"I'd—" I began, and then stopped. I'd been about to say I'd like to see one of those plants, but I didn't want him to think he'd said anything of interest to me.

Just then Julia reached for her cup, but either her vision wasn't working right or her hand was shaking—they both fail a lot these days, her eyes *and* her hands—and it began tottering, about to spill over. Philip moved his fingers so fast my eyes couldn't follow it, and he righted the cup before three drops had fallen to the tray.

"Thank you, young man," she said.

"You're welcome." He glanced at me, and his expression said: *Whatever you think of what I've become, that's something I couldn't have done twelve years ago.*

There was a momentary silence. Then Julia spoke up again. "Is it Halloween?"

"Not for a while yet."

"Oh, that's right! You wore your costume on some other world. Tell me more about the animals."

"Some of them are beautiful, some of them are huge and awesome, some are petite and delicate, and all of them are different from anything you've ever seen or even imagined."

"Do they have . . . ?" she frowned. "I can't remember the word."

"Take your time," he said, holding her hand in one of his and patting it gently with the other to comfort her. "I've got all night."

"I can't remember," she said, close to tears. Her whole body tensed as she reached for a word that might forever elude her. "Big," she said at last. "It was big."

"A big word?" he asked.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Big!"

He looked puzzled. "Do you mean dinosaurs?"

"Yes!" she shouted, an expression of relief on her face as the missing word finally appeared.

"We don't have dinosaurs," he said. "They're unique to Earth. But we have animals that are bigger than the biggest dinosaur that ever lived. One of them is so big, so huge, that he has no natural predators—and because nothing can hurt him, and he has no reason to hide, he glows in the dark."

"All night long?" she asked with a giggle. "Can't he turn off the glow so he can sleep?"

"He doesn't have to," said Philip as if speaking to a child, which in a way she was. "Since he's glowed all his life it doesn't bother him or keep him awake."

"What color is he?" asked Julia.

"When he's hungry, he glows a deep red. When he's angry, he's blue." Finally he smiled. "And when he wants to attract a ladyfriend, he becomes the brightest yellow you ever saw, and pulsates like crazy, almost like a fifty-foot-high flashbulb going off every other second."

"Oh, I wish I could see him!" said Julia. "It must be a wonderful place, this world you live on!"

"I think so." He looked over at me. "Not everybody does."

"I would give everything I have to go there."

"It doesn't take *quite* everything," said Philip, and I tried to imagine the tone of voice he'd have used if he had still been human. "Just most things."

She stared at him curiously. "Were you born there?"

"No, Julia, I wasn't," he said and somehow his face seemed to reflect an infinite sadness as he used her proper name. "I was born right here, in this house."

"It must have been before we moved here," she said, dismissing the notion with a shrug of her narrow shoulders. "But if you were born here, why are you wearing a Halloween costume?"

"This is what people look like where I live."

"It must be one of the suburbs," she said with conviction. "I don't remember seeing anyone like you at the supermarket or the doctor's."

"It's a very distant suburb," he said.

"I thought so," said Julia. "And your name is . . . ?"

"Philip," he said, and for the second time that night I saw a shining tear roll down his cheek.

"Philip," she repeated. "Philip. That's a very nice name."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I'm sure I knew a Philip once." Suddenly she yawned. "I'm getting a little tired."

"Would you like me to leave?" he asked solicitously.

"Could I ask you a favor?"

"Anything."

"My father used to tell me a bedtime story when I went to sleep," said Julia. "Would you tell me a fairy tale?"

"You've never asked *me* for one," I blurted out.

"You don't know any," she replied.

I had to admit she was right.

"I'll be happy to," said Philip. "Shall we lower the light a little—just in case you fall asleep?"

She nodded, spread her pillows out, and laid her head back on one of them.

He reached for the lamp in the wall above the nightstand—the only thing I'd added to the room since he'd left. When he couldn't find a switch, he remembered that it worked by voice command and ordered it to dim itself. Then, in the same room where she had told him a fairy tale almost every night, he told one to her.

"Once there was a young man," he began.

"No," said Julia. He stopped and looked at her curiously. "If this is a fairy tale, he has to be a prince."

"You're right, of course. Once there was a prince."

She nodded her approval. "That's better." Then: "What was his name?"

"What do you think his name was?"

"Prince Philip," said Julia.

"You're absolutely right," he replied. "Once there was a prince named Philip. He was a very well-behaved young man, and tried always to do the bidding of the King and Queen. He studied chivalry and jousting and any number of princely things—but when his classes were done and his weapons were polished and put away and he'd finished his dinner, he would go to his room and read about fabulous places like Oz and Wonderland. He knew that such places couldn't exist, but he wished they could, and every time he found a book or a hole about a new one he would read it or watch it, and wish that somehow, someday *he* could visit such places."

"I know just how he felt!" said Julia with a happy smile on the wrinkled face that I still loved. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to walk along the yellow brick road with the Scarecrow and the Tin Man, or to have a conversation with the Cheshire Cat, or visit the Walrus and the Carpenter?"

"That's what Prince Philip thought too," he agreed. He leaned forward dramatically. "And then one day he made a wonderful discovery."

She sat up and clapped her hands together in her excitement. "He learned how to get to Oz!"

"Not Oz, but an even more wonderful place."

She leaned back, suddenly tired from her efforts. "I'm very glad! Is that the end?"

He shook his head. "No, it isn't. Because you see, nobody in this place looked like the Prince or his parents. He couldn't understand the people who lived there and they couldn't understand him. And they were afraid of anyone who looked and sounded different."

"Most people are," she said sleepily, her eyes closed. "Did *he* wear a Halloween costume too?"

"Yes," said Philip. "But it was a very special costume."

"Oh?" she said, opening her eyes again. "How?"

"Once he put it on, he could never take it off again," explained Philip.

"A magic costume!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, but it meant that he could never be the King of his parents' country, and his father the King was very, very angry at him. But he knew he would never have another chance to visit such a wondrous kingdom again, so he donned the costume and he left his palace and went to live in the magical kingdom."

"Was the costume uncomfortable to put on?" she asked, her voice very briefly more alert than it had been.

"Very," he answered, which was something I'd never thought about before. "But he never complained because he never doubted that it was worth it. And he went to this mystical land, and he saw a thousand strange and beautiful things. Every day there was a new wonder, every night a new vision."

"And he lived happily ever after?" asked Julia.

"So far."

"And did he marry a beautiful princess?"

"Not yet," said Philip. "But he has hopes."

"I think that's a beautiful fairy tale," she said.

"Thank you, Julia."

"You can call me Mother," she said, her voice sharp and cogent. "You were right to go." She turned to me, and somehow I could tell it was the old Julia, the *real* Julia, looking at me. "And *you* had better make your peace with our son."

And as quickly as she said it, the old Julia vanished as she did so often these days, and she was once again the Julia I'd grown used to for the past year. She lay back on the pillow, and looked at our son once more.

"I've forgotten your name," she said apologetically.

"Philip."

"Philip," she repeated. "What a nice name." A pause. "Is it Halloween?"

Before he could answer she was asleep. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek with his misshapen lips, then stood up and walked to the door.

"I'll leave now," he said as I followed him out of her room.

"Not yet," I said.

He stared at me expectantly.

"Come on into the kitchen," I said.

He followed me down the shabby hallway, and when we got there I pulled out a couple of beers, popped them open, and poured two glasses.

"Did it hurt that much?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's over and done with."

"There really are crystal mountains?"

He nodded.

"And flowers that talk?"

"Yes."

"Come into the living room with me," I said, heading out of the kitchen. When we got there I sat in an easy chair and gestured for him to sit down on the sofa.

"What is this about?" he asked.

"Was it really that special?" I asked. "That much of an honor?"

"There were more than six thousand candidates for the position," he said. "I beat them all."

"It must have cost them a pretty penny to make you what you are."

"More than you can imagine."

I took a sip of my beer. "Let's talk."

"We've talked about Mother," he replied. "All that's left is the Pythons, and I haven't kept up with them."

"There's more."

"Oh?"

"Tell me about Wonderland," I said.

He stayed for three days, slept in the long-unused guest room, and then he had to go back. He invited me to come visit him, and I promised I would. But of course I can't leave Julia, and by the time she's gone I'll probably be a little too old and a little too infirm, and it's a long, grueling, expensive trip.

But it's comforting to know that if I ever *do* find a way to get there, I'll be greeted by a loving son who can show his old man around the place and point out all the sights to him. ○

# NORTH SHORE FRIDAY

Nick Mamatas

**Nick Mamatas** is the author of *Move Under Ground, Under My Roof, and Sensation*, and his short fiction from *Tor.com*, *Nature*, and elsewhere has been collected into his book *You Might Sleep*. . . . With Ellen Datlow, Nick co-edited *Haunted Legends* and he now edits Japanese SF/fantasy in translation for VIZ Media's *Haikasoru* imprint. His first story for us reveals many secrets about a dark night in 1965.

**B**ack when Paraskevi's grandmother was in charge of getting guys off the boats and safely married off before they could be found and deported, she gave her granddaughter the same advice every week. One, don't hide anyone at the Greek church, that's the first place they look. Go to the Methodists, they are the kindest of the *xeni*. Two, if Immigration finds you, throw a huge screaming fit—rip at your clothes, scratch your own breast till it bleeds, kick and scream and cry and say over and over that you're going to kill yourself—and they probably won't arrest you. Three, if you feel the government trying to read your mind, *think in Greek*.

Between the backwater dialect, the generation-old slang she learned from her parents, and Red cant, Paraskevi would greet her charges and they would hear something analogous to this: "Can thou y'all comrades dig this crazy-struggle for liberty? Forsooth, thine art copacetic, no?" But yiayia knew that even if the INS had a Greek on their side, they'd get nothing from Paraskevi. Not even in 1965, when we began large-scale full-time brainscanning across Long Island.

Getting Greeks off the boats had the feel of a game. Only a few of the big ships bothered with Port Jefferson anymore. Most of the illegals were someone's brother or everyone's cousin, a far-flung friend, the sons of godmothers, or buddies from the Civil War gone to sea and then looking to go to ground. Immigration went armed and wore their suits like they were mobile homes, but they weren't too bad as authority figures go, not back then anyway. Yiayia ran the show because men were too hot-headed, too ready to throw fists or start screaming at nothing, too proud to beg forgiveness or just skulk away when someone got nabbed and dragged back to the city to be sent on the first plane back to Greece. Plus, the men in the family, like me, didn't have an eye for the nice girls who'd come into the Lobster House with their parents or even by themselves. Girls who knew to pick a man who wore pants with the knees worn out from working, not a man whose pants had patches over the ass from sitting around all day doing nothing. Human smuggling was women's work, and generally not too hard. Yiayia didn't spend more than forty-eight hours in prison at a time and Paraskevi was never caught even once. Well, once . . .

\*\*\*

"Hey, Friday," Jimmy the *mavro* said. "Your grandma is on the pay-phone." Paraskevi went to the phone.

"Hello, Poppi?"

"No, yiayia, it's your other granddaughter," she said. "The one who actually works. The one you called?"

"Oh, I know who I called," yiayia said. "Listen, you have to go to church tonight and light one candle. Do you understand?"

"Malesta, yes. I will."

Smelly gasoline, mustaches. "Eh? Eh?" at the end of sentence. "You like, no? Eh?" Say *ti kanes ti kanes*, will they bring . . .

I hope yiayia's just sick. Maybe I can go home and watch some TV for a change. This place is always dead in November. Three dollars in tips all night, it's so stupid that we even open on—

"Where's Georgi? Is he there?"

"No, he's not here. He's at work. Why would he be here?"

"Work? At night, outside?"

"Well, he's not here anyway."

"Maybe he stopped in for some dinner?"

"He *didn't*, yiayia. It's not even dinner time yet."

"Then you have plenty of time for church, before the dinner rush." The sun hadn't even gone down yet.

These codewords are so dumb.

I wasn't working outside anymore. That was in the summertime. I was an engineer back in the 1960s, and a computer programmer of sorts. This was back in the days of room-sized humming monstrosities, the CDC 3600 and that was the cutting edge—we had older machines too. You know why it was called the Sage System? It knew everything, sure. And it was truly a system. That was my summer job—yiayia thought I was just cutting down trees along Nesconset Highway to make room for radio towers and telephone poles, but it was all part of the system. Even the two screens on the console were round, not like radar displays, but like crystal balls. There was blood in the wiring, magic everywhere. A multidisciplinary endeavor between Stony Brook's computer science and religious studies department.

I can't do a thing with computers now.

Back then, though, I was a genius. I could look at a punch card and divine the data recorded on it. Spread them out on my desk and read them like coffee grains at the bottom of a very large cup. And I was in love with my cousin. My second cousin, mind you. Maybe it's just a Greek thing, or maybe it was just how we were raised. You know, everyone hanging out together all the time, the distrust of the *xeni*. It's hard not to fall in love with whoever is nearby.

Everyone on the North Shore was a test subject. Long Island was our lab. I got very good at what I had to do, and not just swinging an axe. That was only the job my parents, my grandmother and aunt, could understand. I had to explain over and over again

Ah Friday, where are you now, under all that all skin and sixty years of flab? In your snaggle-toothed smile, I still see what I loved . . .

were adding machines, like the cash register, except it could do all the math itself. I was a genius back then. What *fassarea* it all was, really. Most people don't think much of anything. Like apes. We thought the first experiments were a failure because we didn't get any positives in animal testing.

#### FOOD FOOD FOOD

I'm a bit hungry right now myself, actually . . .

I know that the government is reading my mind now. I hope that my thoughts make them blush.

Paraskevi let Jimmy the *mauro* wait with her under the pier, as hobos and rats liked to congregate there, plus he too had a crush on her, and one didn't need a cool billion dollars worth of mind-reading equipment to know that. He played it tight to the vest though, and never even thought about Paraskevi that way. It was beyond our observations, all in the autonomic nervous system, in sweat and twitches and clenching fingers. Poor guy—it was hard to be a black man on Long Island in the 1960s. He was nervous that night, because Paraskevi was.

It's like my father said when he emigrated. "The CIA is responsible! They are behind the *junta*! They sent the tanks through the streets . . ." and he'd just trail off. "So then why did you move to America, papa?" I asked. "I wanted to go to a country with a government the *Amerikanoi* wouldn't overthrow . . ."

"You're going to have to go, and go before he sees you," she explained. "You know?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"I mean, they might think that you're a cop."

rapist, and then they might kill you and decide to rape me. God, I'm so sick to even think . . .

"Forget it," Jimmy said, "Don't explain."

I can't stay here all night anyway, you know?"

"I know."

There was a birdcall in the distance and Jimmy took off, not thinking a thing at all. Paraskevi laughed at the idea of a birdcall at night. The gulls were god-knows-where. "Embos," she said, not knowing that her own grandmother wasn't saying "Hello" when she picked up the phone, not knowing that this illegal didn't have a phone—hell, Andoni had never even seen one except for once, in the Navy—but he heard Greek and a woman's smoky voice so he emerged out of the dark. Paraskevi waved at the time, hunched over, worried about her chest and a man long at sea. Andoni had a cap and he took it off and said, "Hi." Paraskevi didn't smile, not for them. She heard the clinking of glass bottles in his bag. He didn't smell of sweat and ouzo like so many of these guys did, though.

No. Sensitivity was attuned to lab tests; bored psychology students thinking of apples

Of course, there were gypsies in the woods, some of the time. Not too many in November, when the ice was slick over carpets of red-brown leaves, when the ramshackle homes and shacks in which they squatted for a season were too hard to heat with small bonfires and thick blankets. We got along with them, or I did. I'd pay for their meals at the Lobster House, they'd give me tips at the quarter horse track out East, since a lot of them got some work out there fixing horses with their Old World stuff. I had no idea what they did, but it probably involved ramming something up the horse's asses. That's where the conversation so often turned, when I'd meet them out back with coffees and sandwiches anyway.

Think in Greek,  
Think in Greek,  
*Ellinika, me logia*  
*Ellinika*. Stupid  
random words  
*mylo skylo, oraya*  
*kalispera gamo to*  
*panayia*

Good!  
That's  
my  
smile.  
How  
she'd  
smile  
at  
me . . .

There were other things in the woods too. Ghosts of the settlers, long dead. The old Indians were so dead they didn't even have ghosts, except for when we'd fire up the machines. Always at night to avoid brownouts and power outages. But the feds always wanted more. Not better, just more. More results, more miles of tape, more pallets worth of punch cards, so many results nobody could hope to read them all, to assign thoughts to thinkers, before all our equipment went obsolete.

\*\*\*

It's illegal to threaten the president, but it ain't illegal to think about strangling him, is it? *Is this thing on?* \*tap\* \*tap\*

"Don't associate with the *yifti*, they're dirty. You'll turn into one. They'll rob you blind. Be kind to them, but don't be friends. Worse than *mavro*, they are." Whatever happened to that \$500? It was so much back then . . . "Oh they give tips, eh? What did they say for tomorrow's races, *Georgi*?"

Paraskevi almost never thought of me, even though I loved her. That's how I ended up involved in the events of November 9. I was at Stony Brook, in the basement of the brand new building, the one far away from G-Quad, my pants all muddy and wet. In the woods, she called out to me with her mind. I had to go to her. Andoni tried his English. "Is far?" he asked. Paraskevi shook her head no in the Greek way; a sharp nod and a click of the tongue. "Not far, but in circles," she said, waving her arms around.

GEORGE!

It is far.  
Why does  
America  
smell like  
this?

"*Kalo, kalo*, it's okay."

"*Yifti, eh?*" Andoni said. He clutched his bag, tightly, then let out a stream of nervous-sounding Greek

Paraskevi barely understood. *Gypsies and America* and finally the punctuation of so many sentences: *Katalaves?* You understand. No, she didn't. She even thought in . . .

Then they stopped in a clearing. Andoni had to tie his shoes and had to urinate as well. He knew the words toilet and please and didn't point at his crotch, but he did go into his bag and dig out his bottle of ouzo to drink even as he started to piss.

this guy will make a great husband for someone, yah

Lose some  
gain some!

hehehe

What was that poem about miles of walking? I hate school; I wish I could just drop out and just work at the store. It's so friggin' cold; my glasses are gonna fog up again the second I get back home. I always forget that they fog up until I walk into a warm room again. I wonder what Tommy is up to? I wonder if this Andoni guy can tell that I'm not looking at him on purpose . . .

Then, gunfire and seventy-two columns of punch cards

punched hard. Fight or flight, or in this case, a freeze.

Immigration prowled the docks whenever a ship came in. Too many marriage licenses being issued too quickly. Some complaints from the spoiled richie-rich brats up on the hills of Belle Terre. But it was still only Port Jefferson and the pier wasn't that busy, so the INS only had a couple of guys working the beat. They were go-getters, or has-beens, and that night they trudged right after Paraskevi and her three new boys, following them in to the old woods between downtown and the highway. Paraskevi knew the land like she knew her own face—where the tree lines stopped and into which backyards she could spill without a dog barking or an automatic backyard security light flipping on. Where the little streams would crack under the weight of two men but not one. Where the disused rail spurs and the fairly active Long Island Railroad tracks lay. Where the sandpit and the semi-secret Fairchild HQ was. The INS stooges didn't know anything at all, except how to crack branches under their feet, wave flashlights and badges and guns, threaten and bully.

From what I was able to piece together from the punch cards and the frantic whirls and pulses on the screens of the supercomputer: The sheriff got a call about Jimmy the *mavro* hanging out in the marina, by one of the houseboats owned by one of the people made a little too nervous by a Negro. The two im-

Meatloaf, is there  
a more perfect  
dish in all the . . .

Like I knew  
her face. Oh,  
her face.

If they didn't want me to fire my sidearm, they wouldn't have issued me one. We have rules in this country. Get in line, like everyone else. And the defense contractors; what if one of these guys gets a job there and is a Commie? If they didn't want me to fire my sidearm, they wouldn't have issued me one. If they didn't want me to fire my sidearm, they wouldn't have issued me one. If they didn't want me to fire my sidearm, they wouldn't have issued me one.

migration officers happened to be in the sheriff's office at the time, getting some coffee and playing penny poker. They knew Jimmy worked at the restaurant. They knew about Paraskevi's grandmother, and decided to check it out. There was a boat in the harbor, after all. Not quite a tanker, they'd never fit, but a decent-sized ship capable of transatlantic. They went to the Lobster House, which was just beginning to get its dinner crowd in, and saw that the only waitresses on duty looked and decided that Paraskevi was a person of interest. A waitress who doesn't serve burgers and fries is as interesting as a dog that doesn't bark.

normal

It was still a bit light in the sky, and she was easy to spot on the edge of the woods. She was dark, had the long hair and boy's jeans. She wouldn't stop. She ran hard. They went barreling after her. They opened fire. She fell. It wasn't Paraskevi, it was one of the *yifti* kids, a twelve-year-old girl too shy to even think her own name, even as she died.

Paraskevi heard the gunshot and thought my name.

It was no coincidence that I was monitoring her thoughts at the time. It was even part of the experimental protocol. Parapsycholog-

That's what her brother said to call her, anyway.

L  
E  
N  
A

I know I know I know  
mama don't be mad  
I know I'm sorry I know I know  
owow my shirt so wet owow  
it will be okay I can see it  
have to go home to mama  
I'm sorry I'm sorry

ical research never fetishized the idea of the double-blind study, and you know what they say about computer science: "Any field with the word 'science' in its name isn't one." But she thought my name, at the moment I happened to be there, in the lab, to receive it. I knew it was her, as I'd been observing her for weeks—yes, that's fine. There's a hypothesis in parapsychology, the hypothesis of Directional Intention—I was able to read the cards and know it was Paraskevi, know that that screamed my name in her head—because of *my* intention, directed toward her. The machines would have picked it up anyway, of course, but it would have been lost amidst all the grocery lists and frantic burning desire for new shoes or a warm kiss or the pain of a scar to finally fade. If another researcher had been on duty that evening, none of what happened next would have ever happened, because could have only been read in that instant, by me.

GEORGE!

Stupid backfiring  
carscarcar . . . no!

GUN!

I had to know what was going on, and I had the means. The college had an agreement with LILCO. All the power we needed, whenever we needed it. In return—well, what they got in return is beyond my pay grade, but as LILCO is long gone they didn't get much out of it. Something about predicting power outages during hurricane season.

and all Stelyo's  
preferred stock  
along with it. Good,  
that fucker . . .

Yeah, and speaking of power outages, where were you when the lights went out?

Paraskevi couldn't tell that the lights had gone out, not out in the woods. There was a different feel in the air, a different feel to the air. A streak of ozone; a tingle on the skin. A few horns honked in the distance, but that could just be the usual evening traffic up the long twisting road of Main Street. It was twilight, but the streetlamps of town hadn't yet started to burn orange. Something was different, but she didn't know what. There was gunfire, there was immigration. She could only think one word: *Georgi!*

"Pame!" she said to Andoni, because she didn't know how to tell him what she really needed them to do. Run, run in different directions. "I'll wait here!" she said, but then she said "Pame!"—let's go—so they followed her into a clearing.

"Comrade," she said. "It behooves y'all to hit the road. The devil!"

Two men in suits, one with a pistol in his hand, his knuckles and face both white as flour, the other taller and huffing, stumbled into the clearing. "INS," the taller one said. "Hands up."

Andoni looked to Paraskevi. She put her hands up, her chest out. He followed suit, sacks and suitcase hit the ground. The sky turned purple.

"Who did you shoot?" Paraskevi asked.

"No talking," said the man without the gun. "You're under—" he stopped talking. The sky sizzled.

I can't believe I shot that girl. God, god, she's dead. We can't call for help, we can't. I'll be—

Donaldson's so fucked. I should have shot him myself. Let these people go, arrest that motherfucker for murder at least. No, can't do that. I need someone to have my back. I've done so many bad things. The drugs, the girl from Colombia, she was so tight. Don's got a wife, kids. They need him. Why did I even get out of bed

Oh God oh God. Get the bottle. Get smoke. Think in Greek!

Kyrie eleison.  
Kyrie eleison  
Kyrie eleison  
Kyrie eleison  
Kyrie eleison  
Kyrie eleison  
Kyrie eleison  
Kyrie eleison

Paraskevi saw it first. Usually, it takes a sensitive, someone attuned to the "vibe," like the hippies used to say. The girl, Lena, bleached white, smaller than even short, squad Andoni. A little more than like ball lightning in human form, she walked through them all.

Paraskevi, my girl, she was so tough back then. That's how we grew 'em. No shrinking violets back then, no big-haired bimbos. She dove to the ground, grabbed a bottle of ouzo by the neck and swung it against a tree in a single wide arc from the sack it was in to Donaldson's face. Donaldson raised his hands and then his partner grabbed the gun so he wouldn't shoot. Paraskevi took a cigarette from her apron pocket, lit it, and after a puff held the lit cherry up to Donaldson's *Metaxa*-soaked face. "Don't shoot," she said. "Might spark."

Andoni fell back, crossing himself and twitching. It was hard to breathe for a few moments, or it probably was anyway. I remember the feeling from the lab experiments. Hair on end, sinuses tingling; the face of the ghost like an old brown negative held up to the sun and blazing. Poor Lena.

You know, I gave her brothers a reel of 1" tape—the recording of the output. She's on there somewhere. Like ashes in an urn, but with a little charge of magnetism. Software with no hardware left to play her on.

The ghost wandered out of the woods and faded. Paraskevi looked at the other INS agent, his hand still clenched around Donaldson's gun. "Thanks. Do you want to put a ghost in your report?"

"Not a murder either," he said.

The woods were black. The whole East Coast was dark, except for my little lab in the basement of the college.

That's what these cards and reels mean to me, okay? A dead girl, her ghost made from static electricity, secret government psi experiments, my crazy family of scofflaws and badasses, an inappropriate attraction to my cousin, and the big blackout of 1965. She thought of me once. I have proof. She lives in Florida now. Two kids, nice husband. A *xeni*. At first we thought she did it on purpose but he's a nice guy. Jeff, the blond one.

You think I care whether you believe it or not? I know what happened. I'm the only one who knows. Even Paraskevi, your Aunt Friday, only knows about ...

So that's why I keep these old cases around. I'm still looking for an auction, eBay or something, that might sell one of the old machines, so I can read these results. I see the whole story spread out before me, but to prove it to anyone else I'd need a computer antique enough to handle a dead medium.

*Heh, there's a pun in there somewhere—a dead*

Ask Andoni. You've seen him around. Your father's friend—you used to play with his daughter Kelly. Yeah, same guy. He was illegal. A lot of people owe yiayia a lot around here. That's why he wears the *mati* all the time—because he saw a ghost. Why he crosses himself when your father talks about going down to the track, or OTB.

Don't call them *yifti* anymore. They settled. Got houses. Just mind your business about certain things. Immigration tried to deport the family because they were going to sue, but in the end I think we all managed to get them married quick, or prove they were born here. You don't even know who, or what, has been born here. Lots of secrets, you understand? Not just these.

This stuff won't be classified forever. The truth will come out one day. You know the feds are still reading our minds. I'm sure that they're a lot better at it now too, with the Muslims and 9/11. Hell, your iPhone is a million times smarter than my old Cray.

I bet those guys just knew to think in Arabic or Farsi. ☺

Are you listening?

Can you hear me?

Aren't you paying attention any more?

*Katalaves?* Did you hire another Greek? If so, help me ... you know how it is.

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# CLOCKWORKS

William Preston

William Preston's previous story, "Helping Them Take the Old Man Down" (March 2010), was a homage to a pulp hero. The author says the tale "was meant as a one-shot adventure, but months later, more stories about this character came to me, delving into his past and future, forming a larger narrative arc. This prequel is the first of several planned tales, each with a different idea at the center."

## 1. Faces

**T**he force of that first light makes me twist away, sinking my face into the pillow. A man says, "I'll dim that." His voice isn't loud, but it rumbles and penetrates the darkness. I feel him step away and return. "That should be better."

I don't know this pillow, this bed, the man, or my situation, and something tugs the top of my forehead. I put a hand there and find gauze, tape. I'm caught, but unable to think through what that means.

"Try again," he suggests.

Warily, I labor to turn back and open my eyes.

Looking serious but not severe, my captor appears above me, his squarish, close-shorn head blocking much of the light. "You'll feel out of sorts." His mouth barely opens; his voice might be in my brain. "Give yourself another minute before you try to get up."

I see what he means when I disregard this suggestion and the light splinters. My legs seem weightless and my elbows quaver, failing to push me up. With the slightest pressure, his hand restrains me. The white shirtsleeve is rolled to mid-forearm, and I see the strength in the bronze muscles. Were I to resist, I'd be easily subdued.

"Slow your breathing," he counsels.

Heeding him helps. My body assumes its dimensions; the room comes into focus and the light, a single throbbing globe on the ceiling, loses its glare. A dresser, this bed, a wardrobe: all gray metal and unremarkable. No window.

I'm conscious of his enormous hand still on my shoulder, not holding me down, but applying pressure and warmth. That's when I recognize him—not visually, but from the stories, stories not believed until . . . but that's unclear. And now he has me. The stone avenger. The golden knight. The man himself.

"Do you know the year?"

"Nineteen sixty- . . . two."

"Do you know where you are?"

" . . . Chicago?"

"Do you know *who* you are?" he asks.

"Simon Lukic," I say, though the answer seems wrong or only half-true, as if I were

answering on behalf of someone else. And I know another name that claims me: Doctor Blacklight.

"What's your last memory?"

I clench eyes my shut and see a dark apartment. Silhouetted, a large figure steps from the direction of the window; I back into another man at the door. "You were there. You came for me," I say, though the "me" behind that statement feels questionable, an idea rather than a person. My eyes flutter open. "What did you do?"

"I brought you here. I operated. And I hope I fixed you."

A film of sorts plays in my mind, a jumble of scenes: thin men in gray stand shivering on cement; a sink's sides run red as water chatters down the drain; an apartment ceiling seems to bear down, an enormous crack in the plaster; my hand places a slide atop a microscope's black stage. "I can't think right," I say.

His eyes narrow, scrutinize.

I touch the bandage on my head. "What was the . . . the nature of the operation?"

"I repaired your brain. You have choice now."

"Choice?"

"What do you remember?"

More memories—incomplete but sufficient—empty my chest. I look at the blanket. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. I don't remember anything." I prepare a face to present him, but I can't meet his gaze, taking in instead the broad forehead, the thin lips. "What's happened to me?" I bend my arm over my eyes and seek shelter in the dark. It's wrong to lie. A terrible thing. But only now do I feel what *wrong* means, as my deeds multiply with each moment of awareness and stretch back over a lifetime.

What I mistake for a cough becomes crying.

I haven't cried since I was a child, and then only from frustration. What wracks me now isn't like that. My breath comes in gasps, pulling me up from the pillow, and wretched sounds heave up from within me, from my shoulders, from behind my eyes, awful sounds that shame me more, but I can't hold them in and I can't stop the sobbing. It's like drowning. But the ocean is inside me. I'm coughing it out and choking as if the taste of air were unfamiliar.

"This will pass," he says, but clearly his confidence is unfounded.

Spasms of crying grip me, and I sit up to catch my breath. Over a basin sporting a single handle, there's a mirror, and I'm compelled toward it. My legs don't support me well, so I lunge to grab the basin, then fall. I steady myself before I look.

This face stands out so strangely from its surroundings, it seems like a painting while all around it is what's real. I know it and do not. Deep furrows on the brow and lines under the eyes appear darker than I remember; had the colorless hair not receded so far, it might have covered something of the bandage. The hair itself is a mess, and not just from lying on a pillow for who knows how long: for years, I've cut it myself whenever it annoyed me. The eyes appear to retreat from being studied too closely.

He joins me in the mirror. "What do you see?"

I say, "Something terrible." I meet his gaze for the first time. "I lied. I lied about remember—" I'm overwhelmed again, cover my face, lose my balance, and am caught. Weightless, it seems, I'm borne back to the bed and settled.

He says, "That's good. I'd hate to think I damaged your memory."

Half awake, I shuttle through fragmented scenes from my past. I see the gray rooms where I worked, offices, file cabinets that groaned when opened and closed, operating rooms in which my breath hung before me like a ghost reluctant to move

on. Certain moments without notable value appear vividly, palpably: I'm crammed in a car with too many people on a narrow mountain road. Cigarettes pile up in a glass tray. Low-lying buildings crowd together across a subarctic waste; the sound traveling across my ears might be the wind rattling the blond weeds in the field or humans moaning in pain, but I smoke my cigarette until it sears my thumb and index finger. The cold was ever conniving to get inside—into the buildings where I worked, under my clothes. Then I think of ice fishing with my grandfather. He used a propane tank to heat the ice shack, but you felt the cold pressing in from all sides, working from below . . .

Though I see these events playing out, as of yet no thoughts from the scenes attach themselves, only a detached curiosity. I can witness my life but not listen in.

He sits me up, his spread hand supporting my back, to prop another pillow behind me. Great power is contained in that grip, but he distributes the pressure in such a way there might be nothing there at all, as if I were supporting myself.

Inspecting the bandage, he leans close. He slips a silver penlight from his breast pocket and probes my eyes as I stare straight ahead.

"Looking better," he says. "Water?"

"Sh—" is all I say, meaning "Sure," but I'm shaking and dry mouthed. He tilts a glass to my lips. My slurping sounds inhuman. Embarrassed, I pull back sooner than I want.

My hands fumble together atop my stomach. They become more awkward the more I study them.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

"That's a good sign. And we'll deal with that. But tell me. Are there more people?"

There isn't an answer I can readily locate. He must see this.

"How about another approach: What device were they working on, the people we stopped?"

"Device."

"You had them constructing something. In New York. Last year. You'd given instructions, we assume, because the people had been chosen opportunistically, it seems. The homeless, largely."

"Constructing? But I can't build anything."

But I remember again my grandfather and our ice-fishing on the frozen lake. One year, he had me help him build his shack, sawing the pieces for the walls. Out on the ice, having hauled them to the lake in his friend's truck, we set up the walls and used a tarp for the roof. We sat on boxes and fished through square holes cut in the ice.

Black and depthless, the water fronted another world. He warned me about falling through. You'd be dead in moments, he said. The cold. The shock.

I didn't like being in that shack. But then, I had never wanted the close company of others. I do remember that.

The big man touches my arm and I jerk. The memory had hold of me. "Where are we?" I ask.

"A safe place," he says, rising. "The Arctic."

He helps me to the bathroom, just down a brief and narrow corridor whose walls angle strangely. A light pings on automatically when I enter. The bathroom is clean and small; out of place, my body contaminates the space as I go about my business. After I splash my face, I keep my hands over my eyes, my head in the basin, and listen to the water rush from the spigot and gurgle downward.

"Lukic?" he calls, the voice faint, and I shut off the water. I avoid looking at myself as I towel dry.

In the hall again, I let him take my arm to guide me back to the first room. My feet are bare, but the floor is warm, throbbing.

He returns me to bed and proceeds to check the limits of my memory.

"Do you remember returning to the U.S.?"

"Yes. Yes. That was 19 . . . 59?" It shouldn't be so uncertain.

"Who's President now?"

Why is this one difficult? "Kennedy."

We continue. Squares and roots, numbers and words memorized and repeated in reverse order. Word association responses. This goes on for a while, keeping me busy, keeping my emotions from seizing me again.

He asks what I was building, but still I'm no help.

"This is unusual. I don't alter people's memories. I alter people's moral capacity. Yours was damaged, presumably from childhood, and I repaired it. If your memories seem altered in any way, it's because your understanding of events has changed. But you shouldn't have lost anything. Unless you're blocking it out."

As a neurosurgeon, of course I know something of psychiatry. "I had a good childhood." The facts are vague, true, but I want to defend my parents. "They died, you know, my parents. When I was—"

"—in college. Yes, I know."

"My sister took her life."

"I have a file," he says, and I imagine a wall of cabinets in this place, white cabinets and white walls. He'd trundle open a drawer. My folder would be black.

"They were all good people."

"I have no doubts in that regard," he says.

I think of him reaching inside my head—not with a scalpel, but with his bare hands, molding and realigning what lay displaced behind my eyes.

"You're like me," I say. "You cut into people's brains. You make them . . . impressionable."

"No," he says firmly. For the first time I notice the gold flecks in the pale brown of his eyes. When he fixes you with his gaze, those flecks appear to move, to rotate and catch the light. "No," he repeats. "I make it possible for people to be good."

## 2. Mainsprings

**H**ow can I know whether it's day or night? My door remains open at all times, and at all times there's a glow on the hallway wall. I awake from what seems to have been a prolonged sleep and, discomfited by the loose utilitarian pajamas, recover my clothes from the dresser. Below the topmost layer lie folded and laundered the articles I wore when I was apprehended.

Except for the slippers, I change, but I do find my shoes in the lowest drawer. I take them out and turn them over; even in the faint light, I see the state of them; it's been years since I bought shoes. Just now it seems like something I ought to have done. A new wardrobe, as well. Starting over must include such changes.

My slippers slap into the hall and immediately I'm disoriented. The wall isn't in the right place. Light comes from the left, and I follow it, though I'd gotten up in the first place to use the bathroom.

To round the corner and find him seated there, legs apart, arms across his knees, hands together, looking fixedly at me, is to encounter even more disorientation. He's too still. And then he isn't, rising so fast I stumble backward.

He moves quickly enough to catch both my arms. He steadies me to standing.

"That's twice now," I say.

"You'll find your legs soon."

"I'm not so sure."

"Feeling more clear about the recent past?"

"Uh," I say, uncertain how to go about the process of recollection, and conscious of my body's demands. "Can I use the bathroom first?"

"Certainly."

Again, I delay in the close space, entranced by the sound of water in the sink, the noise shutting out all other senses and keeping my memories at bay.

He's waiting for me in the hallway. "The walls look different today," I say.

"They've been moved," he says, phrasing it as if something came through while we slept and rearranged. "I can alter the room sizes here, and I didn't need the operating room."

"Of course."

"And the design makes the place more difficult to reconnoiter, should anyone find it."

I follow him back to where I'd come upon him and take one of the metal seats at a table. He puts his hand atop some papers.

"So how is your memory? Anything on the latest surgeries? Anything about Chicago?"

"Nothing's clear for years. The places I lived . . . they're like dreams."

He produces two black and white images on glossy paper. Fuzzy blobs of light lie alongside one another like pearl necklaces.

"Do you know what this is?"

"It's . . . I know this. Wait. Koryodin. These are the fibers Koryodin made."

"Koryodin."

"A man I knew. A scientist. Soviet."

"Fibers."

"That's what he called them. He stumbled on them, I think. I'm not a chemist or a physicist, you know. They're carbon on the surface. Over some kind of nickel substrate."

"And what are they for?"

"He . . . passed current along them at very low temperatures. Aside from that . . ."

"And what were *you* doing with them?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"That's a puzzle. I wouldn't know *what* to do with them."

"Nevertheless," he says, then pauses to squint in my eyes. "I removed these fibers from the brains of men on whom you operated in New York. I repaired your work. Had I not been using an electron microscope to identify the areas you'd affected, I'd never have spotted these. So what were they doing there? Can you picture those surgeries?"

It's like watching movies of another man's hands, and, complicating matters more, the film jumps and stutters.

"I've done so many. But nothing . . . I can't see anything about those fibers."

"Were you working for someone? Taking orders?"

That sounds familiar, but also incorrect. "I can't think . . ."

"Lives may be at stake."

My eyes tear up. Of course. Every life is important. How did I never appreciate that? Did I know, but not act as if it meant anything? What allowed me to do these things to people?

"Again . . . truly, I have no idea. I can't . . . locate it. There's a blank." I wish I could. I want to. I touch the bandage and am surprised it's dry. It should be drenched with blood. I deserve to suffer for what I've done.

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My past is a tale of obsession unchecked by any moral concerns.

Weary of my profession before I'd taken a residency, I traveled to occupied Berlin after the war. I met men who shared my interests, interests I could never pursue in the States. The purposes must have fascinated me, excited me, though from this distance it's hard to feel it. Condemned prisoners volunteered for our experiments. After two years, the Soviets moved me to the other side of the Urals, to the penal centers.

The first task was to create a soldier who could feel no fear. My early efforts at this . . . succeeded, after a fashion. Numbing someone's survival instinct, however, led them to make, moment to moment, the most foolish decisions. Half of the first test group used their guns on themselves—more out of dim curiosity than anything else.

A separate set of trials explored the possibilities of diminished or inactive responses to pain. Here another load of difficulties presented itself: how to create a soldier who could operate in any effective capacity with an impaired nervous system; how to eliminate pain without eliminating other necessary tactile and neurological responses. My sponsors imagined a being who would continue fighting despite damaging wounds that, though not debilitating, would, because of the pain, curl an ordinary man into a fetal ball. And think of the awe this force would evoke when an enemy encountered such an advancing army.

But single-minded armed fury was better achieved with drugs and devotion. My work did not prosper. Instead, we settled for making people suggestible. This proved useful for the intelligence services, if not for the military.

As for the nickname, it came from a British ex-pat who'd come upon me one day in my lab. I used ultraviolet light to study certain tissue samples I'd stained. "Dr. Black-light," he said. "You're like some mad scientist." I'd made what passed for a laugh, and he'd explained the name to one of my handlers. It stuck.

Eventually, I recognized the need to move on. No one trusted me, as I lacked an ideological framework for my labors, a belief system that justified the operations. All I possessed was a deranged work ethic that troubled even my superiors.

I bribed my way back to the West. A private firm in Brussels employed me for a time; I have no idea what government or former government kept them running, but I had my suspicions. It rained every day; I recall contemplating suicide, but, remembering the fate of those men in the prison camps—to whom I'd felt so superior—I kept myself from putting an end to things out of disdain.

At some point I learned that an operation run by the same Brussels firm that oversaw my work had been put out of business by a mysterious figure from the United States. As a young man, I'd heard something of him, though the tales seemed like narratives from the movies, stories for the purposeless people who kept themselves going by reading fantastic and impossible adventures. Such people needed heroes. They needed God as well. Pulp accounts and rarer news exaggerations—rarer still when I lived overseas—were all I had, nothing that might suggest I was pursued or that I had any authority to worry about except the usual governmental sort.

Nevertheless, I thought to elude detection by moving closer to the enemy, especially since I suspected that the men who employed me might sever our association via means not amenable to me, torching the evidence, as it were.

And sometime after coming to New York, my recall grows less certain.

He's patient. I'm allowed time to sleep, to read from his extensive library (I linger over vibrant anatomical line drawings in a book composed in Arabic; I start a Wooster and Jeeves novel inscribed to my host by, apparently, his mother in a stately rolling script), even to wander the chambers of his hideaway. He shows me how to use the microwave oven—the first I've seen, a roaring metal cabinet—to prepare the various foods he takes from the vast freezer. I stand nearby as he works on a gun of

some kind in his workshop, amazed that he lets me be so close to items that might cause harm. (An armory he indicates to me is locked, however.)

"What will this do?" I ask in regards to the gun.

"It's a project," he says, a slight smile curling his lips and remaining.

"A project" is also what he calls a lower chamber he opens and climbs down into. He's building something in there, welding, an arc light flashing. I lean down and feel air rushing past, fresh air that smells nothing like the Arctic air pumped from the overhead sluices. And there are sounds in the distance.

When he calls this tunnel "a project," I dare to ask, "What kind of project?"

"Something long-term," he says, and I receive that grin again.

"Is someone else working in there?"

"Sorry," he says. "I hate to jinx a work in progress."

Every mechanism requires power. I'm inserting one of those frozen dishes into the microwave oven when that thought comes. How is this base running? I decide there must be some geothermal source of energy. Whoever—or whatever—is drilling a tunnel might have drilled downward as well to tap the earth's own strength.

As for the man himself, what's the source of *his* strength? Conceivably, a good family, an intellect fully fed by his raising, a regimen of learning, moral education, and fitness. My own body is a paltry thing next to his and renders me, by analogy, lacking in personal vitality. For all his talk of allowing me free will, his implications regarding my potential for goodness, I cannot sense such possibilities in myself. Nothing lodges in my hollows.

I sit at the table with him and poke apart a microwaved fish. I feed my body. But it will never be a body such as his. I study how he uses his fork and find myself emulating his grip.

I talk to him about what I've done. When I'm silent, I hear him thinking. Truly. He makes sounds, perhaps unconsciously, when dwelling on some subject. Little clicks. A kind of whistle that seems to come from other rooms. I've watched him when these noises recur; nothing's moving in his face, his jaw, to suggest that some muscle or passage of air or grinding of bone is producing the sounds, yet there they are.

I imagine cutting away his skull, that beautiful skull. I'd never do such a thing; it's merely an image, like from the old book on anatomy.

I ask, "When will I leave?"

He says, "When I'm satisfied you're no longer dangerous. And when we've got some more answers."

"Why don't you just send me to jail?"

"Why do we incarcerate people? Do we expect change? Does the punishment serve as a threat? No threat could have stopped you. You proceeded to damage the minds and bodies of your fellows as if they were mere mechanisms to be disassembled and tossed aside. The sheer callousness of your behavior transcends what most people can even conceive. So what punishment would suit your crime?"

"You thought you were choosing, but you couldn't even choose. You were past choosing. Consider: Who was the man who tortured those people?"

Tears start. It's pathetic, the way I collapse so readily.

"I was," I say. "I was."

"I don't believe that," he says. "Any more than I'm the same person I was when I was two years old and smashed a family heirloom. Nearly every part of my body has changed, been replaced, grown." He places the fingers of one hand on the side of his forehead. "I have the memories of that person. Vaguely. But I'm *not* that person."

"Your operations," I say. "Like the operation you did on me. Where did you learn

the technique? Or how did you perfect it?" His eyes narrow slightly. "Because there's no way—"

"I experimented," he says. He continues to eat as if this line of questioning weren't problematic. "But not on people."

"Should I conclude you operated on primates? You found villainous monkeys?"

"Sociopathic behavior may be observed in nonhuman species," he says. "Not only primates. And rats have memory nodes and decision structures like ours. In addition, I had access to . . . obscure texts."

"I see."

He sets down his fork. "You were concerned that I had done something wrong."

"I didn't mean to cause offense."

"That's not my point." His hand suddenly shoots across the table to grab my shoulder. He enfolds me. "You're cured," he says. "You're well."

When he lets go, I have trouble making my voice loud enough. "I wish I could tell you what those fibers were for." And then another memory flicks to life like kindling catching fire. "At least the voices are gone."

The tiny flick of his eyelids tells me it's possible to surprise even him. A single note, an insect's drone, rises from the wall behind me. I turn, see nothing, follow the sound as it shifts, and find myself turning back to face him. He's staring at a point that might be midway through my brain, and I recognize the inhuman sound as his own. Then it stops.

"This raises a new possibility," he says. "Perhaps you're insane."

### 3. Pendulum

**H**ow could I have forgotten?

I say voices though it might have been one voice. I say voice though I'm not sure it's proper to talk of sound. Words, yes; there were words. Or clusters of words. Packets of ideas. Sometime shortly before I came back to the States, they started, or at least started in earnest. I'd long talked silently to myself as if to some inquiring intelligence, detailing every task and purpose as if someone had asked me to elaborate. *And?* it seemed to ask. *And?* What came later possessed more character.

I understood that I was mentally disturbed. It explained why I did what I did and how my response to my actions wasn't the response people expected. But as the voices didn't interfere with my progress, they became another element in a life no one could have explained to me in the first place.

I tell the big man all of this, but as an outline lacking in precision, paraphrasing a past that remains unclear.

After another long sleep that, I assume, has bridged the night, I rise from bed to find the man himself reading a book in the outer room, wearing a midweight white coat, leather gloves beside him on the table. Before he looks at me, he appears to digest the last passage he's read, measure its significance, and file it away. Then he sets down the book.

"I have to go out," he says. When I don't say anything, he stands and collects his mittens and a bag tucked beneath his chair. "I'll be back before night," he says, as if I have any idea of the time of day.

I have formed the impression that we're underground. The absence of windows led me there, in part, but also the implications of "safe" in a time such as ours. He's built a bomb shelter, of course, and outfitted it to last through the initial terrors of the full exchange of nuclear weapons. It's discouraging, this notion. He doesn't seem like the

kind of man who would hide away while the rest of the world burns, but perhaps it's a wise course of action when facing unwise conditions. With some kind of early warning system, maybe he can hurry his associates here. If he's in nearby, and he has a few minutes . . . and there's that tunnel . . .

I follow him to a door he hasn't previously explained. At the touch of his hand on an unremarkable spot, the door slides open, and we step into a colder space, a combination garage and hangar. Several snowmobiles, a steel-framed buggy with enormous wheels, and a large sledge stand alongside a small two-engine plane that might seat half a dozen people. "You have dogs for the sledge?" I ask.

He graces me with a smile. "Not at present." He steps onto the plane's wing and swings open the cabin door. While I wait, increasingly chilled by the space and a creeping anxiety, he moves about in the interior. Finally he pushes the door open and calls out, "Don't go anywhere."

"No," I say seriously. "I won't."

"I say that for your safety," he says.

Of course. I don't even know where we are. How could I leave?

The plane must possess controls for the hangar. A blank wall becomes ceiling-high double doors that smoothly retract, and cold washes into the hangar. I put up my hand against the sky's empty brightness; straight ahead, the land is a plain of faintly green grasses spotted with flowering purples and yellows. The plain stops at a curving wall of mountains.

I marvel at it until I realize the big man hasn't moved; he's been watching me. "Summer comes to the Arctic as well, you know."

"It's beautiful." I've never said such a thing. Every place I've lived, even in my time at the Soviet camps, I saw the seasons change, but I never welcomed them, never felt them in my body. Always, pressed for time, by mortality, I thought of work to perfect. I thought of people lying helpless under my knives, the brain's folded caverns, of watching the experiments play out. What I thought of as a child, I have no idea; I had burrowed into myself and never saw the sky.

"When you're done admiring the scenery, hit the big button on the wall." He waves once and pulls the plane door fast.

The engine starts and the plane rolls forward so slowly, it's unconvincing. Out on the grasses, it readily picks up speed, buzzing, moving more smoothly than I'd think such irregular ground would allow. And then it's aloft. Not two hundred feet up there comes a shriek like a raptor's, and the plane accelerates so swiftly, it's nearly gone from sight by the time the engine's concussive boom hits the earth and bounds through me.

An absolute silence prevails, until a wind shakes the grasses and stiff flowers. That's when I feel alone. I take in that feeling. It isn't completely awful. I become aware of my blinking and my wet cheeks. My eyes are not bitter eyes any longer. I am merely looking at the chattering grasses of the plain and feeling the absence of the man who rescued me.

Then I push the fat button flat and watch the doors shut out the astonishing brilliance. As I do, I remember he can control the doors from the plane. He left them open. He let me decide how long to look.

I eat, read, doze, eat, and try push-ups. Jittery, I wander the rooms he hasn't secured. I don't hear the plane return, that's how sealed this fortress is against the world. As it happens, I'm passing the hangar door when it slides open. The great man fills it, looking right at me, unzipping his jacket.

"You've been all right?"

"You startled me."

"Sorry."

"Yes . . . I've been all right." He steps into the room. "Where were you?"

He takes a breath, and I expect some profound answer. "I went for groceries. Why don't you give us a hand?"

I follow him back into the hangar, and I see that the "us" wasn't an affect of aggrandizement. There's another man, in his thirties but white-haired, bespectacled, lugging long flat packages. I find myself looking at his burden and not his eyes. "Seal meat!" he says, as if it were wonderful news.

"David Birdwell," says the big man.

"How do," says the other, but he doesn't pause as he hustles past me.

"Birdy's going to have a look at you," I'm told. Then I help unload the plane.

Birdy is from Minneapolis, and he means to hypnotize me.

I've never played with hypnotism. The Soviets buried post-hypnotic suggestions in agents who didn't know they were agents—but that proved to be science fiction, just as their hunt for men with the ability to telekinetically disrupt missiles proved to be fantasy. I felt comfortable only with what I could see, the body's chemistry and fleshy wiring.

We're seated across from each other. Birdy has taken a pillow from my bed to prop behind my back, since the success of hypnotism relies on comfort and trust. "The doctor is in," he says, leaning close and widening his eyes as if this were all for fun. His jacket with elbow patches is so worn, it must serve as his uniform. "Well, he's the real doctor," he says with a nod at the closed door, behind which, somewhere, the man himself awaits the outcome.

"You're *not* a doctor?"

"I am. Just not *the* doctor. Anyway, he'll tell you I'm better at this than he is. It's a load of bull, but I do what I'm told." He's smiling as he says it.

"I doubt you'll get what you want. I'm not keeping back anything."

"Well, we could use drugs, but the big guy's not too keen on that solution. Plus, I understand you've already used some things on yourself over the years, psychotropic substances, and we don't want to trigger a flashback or some such thing. This is just a way to maybe get at some information that's been . . . hiding."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know what you've done. Is that what you mean? The big man would say that's not who you are. It's who you *were*."

"And who are you?"

"Here, I'm 'Birdy.' In the real world, I have a small practice, and I'm connected with a hospital in the city."

"You're who he calls for psychiatric consultations?"

He laughs and rubs one knee absently. "No, no. The tasks vary. All kinds of crazy stuff."

"Like what?"

Twice more he rubs his knee. Then he says, "The Work," and I hear the capital letter. "We're all just doing . . . the Work. I trust the big man. Whatever he says to do, it's going to be right. Are you nervous?"

"No, but I doubt I can be hypnotized."

"And why is that?"

I shrug. "My psyche's too damaged. And I've never thought of myself as open to suggestion. Every awful thing I did, it came from inside me."

"I think we're confusing some issues here," says Birdy. "Let me show you something." From his jacket he slips a slender line with a cone-shaped stone attached to one end. "This was a gift from a former teacher. Here. Take it like this."

I follow his instructions, holding the plumb by the thread, letting it sway in the open air between us. He takes the stone in his finger, pulls it to the side and releases it. "See how it swings left to right and back? Okay. Now, if you're a woman, and I do that, the pendulum will keep that motion. If you're a man, it'll eventually shift to a motion perpendicular to that. Hold on and watch." The stone swings back and forth perhaps a dozen times, then seems to rotate slightly, keel off from true and, after making several circles, begin elliptical motion completely at odds with its start. Another dozen swings and it moves between Birdy and me as if we drew it like magnets.

"It's a trick," I say.

He stops the pendulum, and I release it into his palm. He asks, "What moved the stone?"

"It seemed to do it itself. But that can't be right."

"True. You moved the stone. That's the power of suggestion."

Already, I feel dozy and ready to unload the burden of my baffled will. "Listen to me," I say. "This will sound . . . absurd. But I don't know who I am."

"You've been through a trauma. And I don't mean waking up from the operation. I mean the life you had before the operation. Decades of trauma that you didn't properly perceive or process. You haven't had the chance to find out what makes you tick."

"And what makes *him* tick?"

He opens his palm to show the pendant. I think he's going to use it to illustrate another point, but he merely worries the stone with his thumb. "He's exactly what he appears to be," he says. "He's . . . complete. He'd never say that about himself. To his way of thinking, he can always do more, be better. But to me . . . he's the only fully intact human I've ever met."

"Does he have a flaw?"

Birdy stills all motion. "Why would you ask that?"

"No, I don't mean it like that. I wouldn't harm him. That's not what I mean. But you're saying he's perfect."

His jaw works from side to side as he considers. "His weakness is that he's only human. But he'd never say that. He'd say that being human is his greatest strength."

He uses a pencil. I stare at the pink eraser, he counts backward from ten, I think how foolish and simple this is, like a child's game, so unlike the world I inhabited only days before, and when he dips the eraser forward and down, my eyelids drop, and I think that without a doubt this world with these men is better and that, perhaps, I can do something to help them.

He takes me back to the moment of my capture. I see again the dim room and the large figure rearing up from where it waited. Then I go back, back. I'm on the street, sweating because I dressed in the morning for a cooler day, and here I am in a jacket on a day of still air and haze.

Back, back.

I have money I withdraw from a bank, an account I set up for myself while still in Europe. This is how I live. But what do I do with my days?

"Where are you now?" asks Birdy.

"A room."

"What kind of room?"

"I see surgical tools. My hands."

"Can you look around the room?"

"I can't. I can't move. My hands are moving. This is rather interesting."

"How did you get to the room?"

"I'm always in the room."

He prods me to head in different directions, but I'm stuck. At one point, I open my eyes.

"Am I awake now?" I ask.

"Partly. Shut your eyes."

"I'm not helping."

"Shut your eyes. I'll bring you up."

I do what he says. He counts forward, waking my limbs, my head, then opening my eyes.

I say, "I'm so sorry."

The big man leans in the doorway. Weakened, I leave the chair and sit propped up in the bed.

Birdy says, "We've got those voices to consider."

"Interpretation?"

"Well, there's nothing in his file," he says, then looks at me. "—in *your* file. Sorry to talk about you like you're not here."

"I don't mind."

"Anyway, there's nothing to indicate schizophrenia. It's certainly possible, with all the drugs you've used on yourself, that the voices are a type of flashback or the result of brain damage. But I don't know. If we knew what the voices said. Perhaps they're buried memories."

The big man says, "It's not something my operation would have fixed."

"With all due respect, you can't know that. I'm not saying you don't know what you're doing, but we're dealing with plenty of unknowns here."

I'm sure the big man means no threat when he crosses his arms, but his biceps bulge imposingly. "No voices now?"

"None. Not since I woke up here."

He slightly lifts one brow.

"Contemporaneoussness doesn't mean correlation," he says.

"It strongly implies it," says Birdy. He pauses. "You're worried."

"Just thoughtful."

"For you, that'll do."

It's a sign of my mental dullness these days that I don't think until later that they could have had that conversation in private. They want me to hear it. They want me to know they still don't fully trust me—and that I shouldn't trust myself.

I awake unsure I'm awake, the room utterly black for the first time. My eyes are open, but they burn, needing sleep. A voice from inside the pillow says, *You.*

"Right here," I say aloud, not whispering.

We.

I think about what to say this time. I reply, "You're not real," thinking that might end it.

But the voice comes back: *We. Have a task.*

I won't be doing anything you tell me, I say in my head. I picture the words and hear them.

I push away everything except an image of the big man; I imagine him awake as I sleep, seated as if on a throne, hand to jaw, reflective, watchful, guarding me through the night.

I hear someone speak. It brings me half-awake, an image from a dream—trees, a river, a metal structure on the other side—superimposed on the room's blank walls.

Excited, I slap my feet to the floor and rush into the main room without dressing. They're both there, the big man with his arms crossed, Birdy gesturing as he speaks.

"I had a dream," I say. Birdy suspends his motions mid-gesture and looks me up and down. The big man barely moves.

"Tell us."

"It's big. A big machine. Like in a factory. Or it is a factory."

"What does it do?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it's not even real," says Birdy. "It's a metaphor. For your mental state. Or for an elaborate plan."

"We're missing something," says the big man, eyes searching. "For now, let's assume you've remembered something. There was the machine from New York. Pieces."

"Which you told him about. We contaminated his dreams."

He doesn't nod, but something about how he stands indicates agreement. "We go with what we have. We'll tell Chicago we're looking for something big." The last he aims at me: "I'll get you a bag to pack."

#### 4. Hands

Like the Arctic redoubt, the plane's cabin must be well insulated against noise (and our pilot the finest), because the only indication that we slow to an air speed that won't alarm a traffic control tower or lead to the scrambling of interceptor jets is a lessening of the tension in my neck. The ground finally leaves my window.

"We're climbing to radar range," the man himself informs us, perhaps for politeness' sake.

"Meigs Field?" asks Birdy.

"Yes. Fewer questions."

It's still some time before we near Chicago; I watch Birdy and try to relax, but I'm not practiced in this. Seeing him read a book, I wish I'd brought the Wooster and Jeeves. Several times I catch his eye, and he smiles momentarily before returning to his text.

I've known leisure, but always an anxious kind of leisure. Strong drink relieved it—or made it pass less consciously, in any case. Drugs. Mostly I immersed myself in work, dreams of crafting a human mechanism that would be perfect because it lacked those things that made us weak. I never thought of honors coming to me or earning anything more than money for more comfortable belongings. They did give me a dacha outside Moscow at one point, but within a year they gave it out from under me to a party official who oversaw cryptographic research. I'd only spent the odd week there in any case.

Now, despite the ticking down of a timer on whatever events are to come, my body feels capable of relaxing. I don't want a cigarette. I touch my nose to the window. The few clouds are high, well above us, throwing their shapes on sharply outlined fields. I wonder about the lives of the people below. I imagine them standing on their lawns and porches as the shadows blanket them and move on. They are helpless—against the greater terrors and against people such as me. And I wish I could change places with any of them, with a child, even. From my front porch, I'd look across the flat landscape and marvel at the movement of sunlight and shadow, the unplanned patterns nature continuously invents.

Wind comes in off the lake, cooling my face, but the tarmac and the fields beyond

shimmer with heat. Between the time we land and the moment we step from the brief, bright terminal onto the front walk, the pits of my shirt soak and a trickle starts down my back.

From the direction of the parking lot, two men hurry toward us. Striding with vigorous speed is a slender black man in a brown jacket. His hair parts sharply down the middle of his head. His companion, jogging to keep up, is a white man with a military haircut. Wearing a dark t-shirt that's taut around his neck and biceps, he carries his arms away from his body, the muscles forcing them outward.

"Sorry," says the black man. "I had to wait for my brother-in-law's car. Actually saw your plane make its approach." To Birdy, he introduces himself as Randy, and I set down my duffel when he puts out his hand toward me. There's a hiccup in the handshake while he glances at the bandage on my head.

Birdy obviously knows the second man, judging by their interaction, which gives Randy a chance to say to me, "That's Tug." The muscular man overhears.

"Hey," he says, moving Randy aside. "Serge Hartoonian."

"Tug' fits better," says Randy, as if confidentially.

Tug doesn't take my hand, but confronts me with arms akimbo. "Remember me, Lukic? I'm partially responsible for that bandage." I do remember: He was the other man in the room, the one blocking the door. I struggled with him briefly, ineffectively.

"I'm sorry," I say, thinking he might elect to hit me.

"Prove it," he says, and turns to the man himself, who, if he's spoken throughout any of this, has done so without my hearing it. Tug updates him on their progress: for the past week, since I was discovered in Chicago, they've been searching the city for the weapon they believe I'm building. I get the sense dozens of people are involved in the hunt. "We altered our search in light of the new information about the weapon's possible size. Maybe we're not dealing with a bomb. Not unless this guy's got a thing for Rube Goldberg devices."

"I don't—" I begin, not knowing where the sentence will go, but Randy interrupts.

"We'd been sweeping the area for radiation sources anyway. Drove all around his neighborhood. But now we can narrow the search."

"It's like looking for plutonium in a haystack," says Birdy, but the other two give him puzzled looks.

"Not really," says Randy.

"That we could do," says Tug.

I wave my hands shyly. "But didn't anyone follow me to see where I went?"

Tug says, "You never went anywhere except out to eat. For two days. The big man figured we'd get more done faster if we just grabbed you."

"Perhaps I was mistaken," the big man says distantly, looking over our heads.

We're walking toward the parking lot now. "In any case," Tug says, "there weren't even trace amounts of radiation on you or in your apartment."

"Maybe I hadn't obtained it yet," I offer. "Maybe I'm building something that needs plutonium, but I don't have it."

"Then there are those microscopic carbon tubes," says Randy. "What if they're transceivers of some kind? Picking up signals. Consider their placement in the brain."

"It's a possibility," says the big man.

We arrive at the car, a wide, four-door, mustard-colored vehicle. Everyone stands eyeing it while Randy digs the keys from his pocket. First he opens the trunk, and we toss in our bags among several others. "Doors are open," he says.

Birdy asks Tug, "Where's your car?" and Tug says, grimly, "It died."

I climb in back and scoot across the hot plastic seat to make room for the man himself, who makes every space seem too small. The others get in front, Birdy in the middle.

"You're out of New York, right? What are you doing in Chicago?" Birdy asks Randy. "Visiting my sister." The engine reluctantly churns to life.

"Could we possibly get the engine checked?" asks Tug. "We'll be announcing ourselves to . . . to whatever."

Randy says, "It beats walking."

"I'll take the El and meet you there." Tug shifts about awkwardly. "Everybody should buckle up."

"Is this your entire team?" I ask the big man.

"The makeup varies depending on the mission."

Tug turns halfway around. "Think we'll get any women someday?"

"You personally?" asks Randy.

"Careful what you ask for," says the man himself. "But I've got some names."

"So where are we heading, big man?" asks Randy.

"For now, where we picked up Lukic. If we don't get anything definite there, we're welcome at your sister's?"

"You're all invited for dinner," says Randy. "It's closer than Tug's place in the boonies."

"It's not the boonies," says Tug.

"You say."

As the car leaves the peninsula of land holding the airfield, we pass the Adler Planetarium dome. Randy points it out. "I wish I could see the stars more. Puts things in perspective. In New York, you never see them. Took my son to the Hayden last week."

"I should try to fit in a visit before I leave town," says Birdy, ducking his head for a better look.

"You guys do realize," says Tug, "this city may be a smoldering pile of ash by tomorrow."

"Shoot," says Randy. "That's nothing new for us, right, big guy? Hey," he says to us all, "I was in the City for Shepard's parade."

"To the stars and back," muses Birdy.

Tug makes a derisive sound and mumbles.

"Come again?" says Birdy.

"Suborbital. The flight was suborbital. The Soviets already orbited. For *real*."

Randy has his elbow out the window. "Are you just trying to piss everybody off? Jesus. I plan to work for those folks someday."

"Randy's an electrical engineer," the big man tells me.

Randy catches my eye in the rearview mirror. "Tug's here because every team needs a big dumb guy."

"Actually," says the big man, "Tug's a chemist."

"Randy," says Tug, "I'm sure those white guys in white shirts are just sitting around waiting for your crisp white application."

Birdy says to the roof, "This is turning out well."

"Obviously," says the big man in his effortless rumble, "I'll have to rethink this teaming in the future."

And I wonder: When did I last look at the stars?

Windows down, we head into the heart of the city and then south, humid air fanning me. I am returning to the scene of crimes I don't even recall. All along, the men talk, lapse into silence, talk again, their leader saying nothing, only tapping Randy once on the shoulder and pointing toward a street. I don't listen to their words, which become, in time, a coil of sound that connects them. I sense what these men would do for each other—and what no doubt they've done before.

I'm told it's Saturday. It's hard to breathe, and the car smells of smoke. I'd smoked

in the penal camps, busying my hands and mouth to spare me further social demands, but I'd never cared for it—though I'm only realizing this now.

"How can you possibly wear a jacket in this weather?" Tug asks Randy, as if noticing for the first time.

"Hey, this is my look."

"You *look* stupid."

Randy finds an empty spot on the block where they'd found me.

"Let's hope someone steals this while we're inside," says Tug before getting out.

I ask the man himself, "Shouldn't you be disguised or something?"

"Ideally," he says. Nevertheless, once out, he moves quickly across the street, which hasn't much automotive traffic but is busy with people, including quite a few children. Three girls jumping rope stop to watch the big man approach. An older black man with close salt-and-pepper hair sits erect on the steps of my former building, a transistor radio pressed to his ear. He raises his eyes and returns Randy's nod.

The big man produces the outer door key and we follow him into the cool entry. "Why don't you lead us?" he says to me.

Nothing is the same, though it's been only days. The steps seem the wrong height; the irregularities in the black paint on the banister feel colder and more pronounced, though I'd felt them for months.

"Anything coming back?" asks Birdy.

"Of course I remember being here . . ." I say.

"What kinds of things did you think about?"

We reach the second floor landing. "I thought about sleep. What a relief it would be to sleep."

"That's something," Birdy says.

"You consider that helpful?" asks Randy.

"It's greater than zero."

Automatically, I reach in my pocket, but the big man has that key as well, so I stand aside. "Go in first," he says.

I do, expecting a revelatory moment and images of the past pouring over me, but time merely tromps on, the scene before me simply dim, untidy, and unremarkable. Everyone waits, and at my shrug Randy steps forward to open the shade. A little light widens the space. I drift from room to room, aware of the others hanging back.

"I remember living here," I say, "but it's like it's all one day, not distinct days." I'm in the bathroom, which has no signs of occupation. The big man fills the doorway. I open the medicine cabinet.

"That's where we found more of the carbon tubes," he tells me.

"Hardly seems like where you'd keep something important. So maybe they aren't important."

"Maybe you didn't think so. Someone thought they were important enough to implant in people's brains. And you brought them here, or had them sent, from five thousand miles away."

"Are you imagining some . . . vast conspiracy? Or a scheme in which each person played a part but didn't know it?"

"Regardless of how many are involved in any plot, even the largest conspiracies rely on individual acts. Anyone, at any moment, could undo the whole mechanism." He lets me turn that over, then backs away to let me out.

In the kitchen, the cupboards have been emptied. I touch one stove burner, idly.

"What do you do with people like me?" I ask the big man.

"What do you mean?"

"Afterward. Do we simply get returned to the point of extraction, as if we never left?"

"No. Everything starts over."

My chest tightens. I'm not looking at him, but into the empty refrigerator.

"It'll be all right," he says.

"You don't know that."

"I'm expressing an informed opinion. Based on experience."

"How did you even find me?"

"A lot of people keep their eyes open on my behalf."

The others join us in the kitchen. "Results?" asks Birdy.

For lack of anything else to do, I keep studying the open refrigerator. It's cold—they've left it on—but empty. I say, "The light's out."

They wait. "And?" says Tug.

"It's been out for months. But it didn't matter to me."

When I become conscious of my open mouth and audible breathing, I realize it's time to leave.

On the way outside, we pass the man on the steps again. When the big man stops on the sidewalk, Randy turns to lean on the metal railing and faces the seated man, then he jerks his thumb at me. "I'm wondering if maybe you recognize this guy."

He pulls his radio from his ear; the sounds of whatever he's listening to seem only faint vibrations. "I do indeed."

"Ever notice anything about him?"

He looks me up and down, lower lip out. I think he's going to come out with some criticism of how I'm dressed, but he only says, "Like what, in particular?"

"Carrying anything. With anybody else. Acting suspicious."

"Can't say I have. Only strange thing is, he never says hi."

Randy straightens. "Maybe you should rectify that, Mr. Lukic."

"Hello," I say, with whatever sincerity I can muster.

"Hello yourself," the man says. "That it?" he asks Randy.

"That's it."

The man puts the radio back to his head. "You all have a good day now," he says, and as a group, we thank him. The girls with the jump-rope have ceased all activity to critically study the man himself. He gives them a wink and leads us away.

We drive around neighboring streets but, again, my memory remains impervious to jarring. Then we head to Randy's sister's place.

I hope we're not spending the night, since the apartment only has one bedroom. The husband, Lonnie, big-shouldered and curve-backed as a bear, cooks the pork chops, and I fix on the sweat beading above his collar. Randy's sister, Esther, hair exploding outward like a dandelion, takes her husband's cigarette from his hand and ditches it in the sink.

He looks over his shoulder at the rest of us, seated at a round table between the refrigerator and the living room sofa. "She's trying to make us look too good," he says.

She waves his words off as she might wave at his smoke.

Each time the phone rings, Randy gets it, but always returns shaking his head at the man himself. When he answers the ringing during dinner, all of us crowded around the table, Birdy asks Esther, "How do you know the phone's not for you?"

"Nobody calls us," she says. "We've only lived here a year. We were in Philly before that. So we don't have a load of connections. Our folks only call on the weekend."

"When the workday's done," says her husband, "it's just us."

"Randy seems to have a few connections here," says Birdy.

"They're not *his* connections," says Tug. "If we were at my place, the calls would come there."

At one point, Lonnie leans toward the big man, whom he's been studying, and says,

"Given what I hear tell about you, I have to express some surprise that you're breaking bread with us. I mean, don't you have some kind of secret base in every city?"

"Lonnie," says his wife.

"It's a reasonable question," says the big man, but he leaves it at that.

Aside from an introduction, I've said nothing, having nothing to say. Shame, a new sensation that makes my skin feel oversensitive, holds me back. I watch the others and think how to imitate their ease.

"So what's your thing?" Lonnie asks, rounding on me.

"My thing?"

"You know. Your specialty. All you guys have some specialty, right? That's how he picks you. Everyone the best and brightest. Top dogs. What's *your* thing?" He's looking at me directly, and he waits a few beats. "Or are you just some kind of generally smart guy, some genius type?" Again, the phone rings.

"No. No. Nothing like that. Nothing special."

"I didn't know humility was a super-power."

"Oh, I—"

He drinks beer from his glass and shrugs. "You people sure keep everything close to the vest."

"I'm a surgeon," I say, and he studies me as if that were unlikely.

"That how you got that head wound, operating on yourself?"

Reflexively, I touch the bandage, ducking my head.

"You know I'm glad Allan brought a surgeon," Lonnie continues. "I could sure use someone to check my back. I'm getting a lot of pain down low, 'specially since I married this woman, know what I'm saying?"

"I'm not—," I say, but he's laughing, high pitched, and shoves me with his shoulder.

"You guys could use a sense of humor. Maybe you need a *comedian* on the team, lighten the load a bit."

"Who's Allan?" Birdy asks.

Esther says, "My brother. 'Randy.' Don't you know that? Name's Allan Randall."

"What's with you guys and the nicknames?" asks Lonnie.

"It started a long time ago," says the man himself.

Tug gives a sour laugh. "It means we love each other," he says, then cuts again into the meat.

After the meal, I stand on the small balcony and watch the people below in the glow of the summer evening. Their voices rise and twist and mix with other sounds of the city, yet still remain distinct. The sun has just gone down. Some clothes hang from a wire on one side of the balcony. They might never dry, the night is so humid and still.

When my name is called, I poke my head inside. Everyone is watching the big man. "We have our leads," he says. "It's time."

They've spread a map on the dining table. "Three possible sites," the big man tells me. He gives me the addresses. "Anything strike a chord?"

I look helplessly at the map and shake my head.

Tug drags his finger on the map, slows, and stops. "Here's where we picked him up. Let's start with the nearest site. Right here."

"Our guy says it was a meat-packing plant until a few months ago," says Randy. "Business relocated to Indiana. Now we've got people coming and going at odd hours and bringing things in with them. Somebody noticed that a few looked like they'd recently had some bad haircuts." He gives me a significant look as he touches two fingers near the top of his head—where I shaved for my operations.

"What about the other places?" the big man asks.

"Sounds more like regular criminal stuff going on. Or squatters."

"We'll pass that to the authorities." Following the big man's lead, everyone straightens. "Five minutes."

"I call the bathroom," says Tug, who hustles off.

"Lonnie," says the big man, "we'll need your car again, if we may."

Lonnie sighs enormously, then grins. "Not gonna blow it up, are you?"

Randy takes a step forward. "Don't make the man give guarantees like that, right?"

Randy's sister brushes his arm with just her nails. "I should be worried, right?"

He catches her hand. "You know how long the big man's been *doing* this kind of thing? He'll be doing it forever. Pretty soon, we'll start calling him the *old man*."

The big man smiles. "Not just yet."

## 5. Verge

**T**he car feels close and smells worse than before. There's no banter now, and any voice sounds out of place, isolated. As we move through a warren of streets, the windows are open to the sizzling sound of the tires on the road, the inconstant growl of the engine and a rattling some loose metal piece makes.

"Next right," says Tug. "That's the block."

Randy simply drives, both hands on the wheel. We ease over to the curb, and the car gives a glottal cough as it stops.

The big man touches my arm. "Anything?"

I put my face past the window's edge and eye the building in question, a brick nothing that takes up half the block. Barred windows ten feet up on one side show light. Past the former slaughterhouse there's a smaller white building missing a large chunk of its façade. It's dark, though the streetlamps along the block make it sharply visible.

"I heard a voice last night. In my head."

"You said you weren't hearing the voices."

"I wasn't. And I'm not sure . . . I didn't remember until now. I couldn't tell you what was said."

"What did *you* say?"

That I remembered. "I said to leave me alone."

"This guy's an awful lot of help," says Randy.

"I do think I recognize this place," I say. "I've been here."

"What did you do? Was this where you operated?"

"Maybe."

The men check their weapons before they leave the car. "Do you expect to shoot someone?" I ask.

"The boss developed these," says Tug, waving his gun. "Three types of discharge at the flick of a switch. Only one is lethal."

"We may not need them," the big man says.

Unarmed and uneasy, I get out. Straight overhead, the moon is a smudge behind heavy, motionless clouds. My legs quiver.

"Feel that?" says Tug.

He indicates the ground. Now I notice the thrumming from below. Each man taking a predetermined role, they look in four directions as we cross the street. I stumble slightly at a momentary tremor, and the men all turn to me.

Scowling, Randy flattens his hand to his chest. "Made my heart skip."

"The machine's running," says Tug.

The big man races for the building while the rest of us watch him move. "Time's up!" he shouts.

The nearest door, double, steel and possibly maroon—it's hard to tell in this light—lacks a handle. The lock appears to be painted over, never used. When the big man puts out his hand, Randy, who's been digging into his pack, passes into his palm what appears to be the same penlight with which he looked at the innards of my eyes. At a snap, some wad of material spits from the pen to his other palm, and he flings it at the wall. A black web, perhaps three feet across, slaps against the bricks and stays.

Hand a few inches from the door, he aims the pen. A spot near the door's lock sparks, the metal runs, and the air around us grows even darker as every streetlight dims.

"That web . . ." I say.

"Lasers require energy," says the big man. Steadily as a surgeon, he moves his hand in a smooth circle. Within seconds, he's done. He pounds the incised disk of metal with his palm and I hear it clatter inside. He shoves two fingers into the hole, removes the bolt, I suppose, and wrenches open the door.

Now, whatever is inside is audible, a rapid pumping accompanied by other sounds. "Stay behind me," he says, and I move close to his back, making myself small. We enter a corridor with concrete floor and brick walls. It's dark, but I'm aware of some light ahead that's spilled this far. All along, the mechanical racket grows louder and more complex, several distinct sounds competing with each other. There's an insistent whine, the subterranean murmur we'd felt outside, and a rushing sound like air sucked and expelled. Then I turn as the big man turns and we're in an open area of the building.

I hear Birdy say, "Whoa."

"Oh hell," says Randy.

The big man twists about. I try to stay at his back, but he grabs my arm and pulls me in front of him. "There's your contrivance," he says, and, taking up fully a third of an enormous room, it looks like something assembled out of several machines never meant to go together, a child's idea formed of taking every toy in his room and finding ways to make them fit. There's no exterior to the thing; it's all exposed. I recognize pieces of car engines, twisted sheets of aluminum or tin high up on a lattice of interlocking steel bars, elements from hydraulic systems furiously working. There's something like a whirligig, opposed metal balls spinning rapidly as if moved by a violent, localized wind. And in the middle . . .

"What the hell are *they* doing?" asks Randy.

Perhaps twenty people lie piled together in a flattened ball, their heads toward one another. They might be dead.

"The victims," says the big man.

Now I see food scattered about the floor. Human feces and urine mark the room's corners.

Weapon aimed with one hand, Tug approaches the group. "Hey!" he shouts over the din. "Hey!" He pokes at them with his foot; one man pitches to the side, then slowly reclaims his position. "They're alive!"

"Did you hear that?" Birdy asks the big man.

"Yes. One tone changed." He shouts to Tug to push another man over. Tug complies, a man slides from the pile, and even I hear, amid the dissonance, the lowering note that's restored when the man rights himself.

"You made them open to suggestion," the big man says. "What did you suggest? Why are they like that?" I'm unable to speak. I hold my hands apart and struggle to

make sense of the scene. The machine is indeed the one of which I dreamt—which only makes the situation more unreal.

Randy, in among the workings, has his hands splayed on either side of his head. "We're gonna have to blow up the whole damn block."

The big man, pulling me along, strides closer. "Maybe not," he says, and points up. "I see several structural weaknesses."

Tug returns his weapon to the bag on his shoulder. "How the hell is this thing even running?"

"You tell me," says the big man.

"No cables," says Randy. "No wires. Nothing like a battery."

I see Birdy wince. "It's getting much too loud. If they're done, and the thing is running, why are they still here?"

"This boosts Randy's theory about those wires in their heads," says the big man. "Some kind of transceiver, connecting them, feeding them information. Maybe drawing energy."

I approach one section that appears to have been taken from the workings of Big Ben, a huge-toothed crown of metal, six-spoked, advancing slowly around a metal axis and supported by a small network of bars. A flap descends from a bar positioned horizontally above it, lifting as each tooth pushes it along.

Is the device doing anything except making noise? Perhaps it's a madman's dream. Perhaps it's my dream.

"What's it for?" asks Birdy.

"There was that time machine under Seattle," muses Randy.

"That was not a time machine," says Tug.

Birdy looks back and forth between the two men, who are circling the uprights about twenty feet apart. "You guys dealt with a *time machine*?"

"We definitely did not," says Tug.

"This thing's warm," says Randy, his hand along a beam. "But not hot. And we definitely did. What other explanation do you have? There were *two* of that guy at one point!"

Tug is inspecting a point where two beams intersect. "The eyes lie. Birdy can tell you that."

"Yeah," scoffs Randy. "So the Mad Magician did it with mirrors. Is that what you're saying?"

Tug tilts his head toward the big man, standing farther back to eye the entire device. "Ask the boss. Was that a time machine?"

"I'm still withholding judgment," he says. "And it doesn't matter what this device is for. It's not formulating a cure for cancer. We need tools now to dismantle this thing. The weakest points seem to be higher up. Tools are in the trunk?"

"I'll go," says Birdy. Randy tosses him the car keys, and he sets off the way we'd come.

"How about that underworld thing in that Hopi village?" Randy asks.

"I wasn't there," says Tug. "And neither were you."

"Yeah, but you know the story. Maybe this is summoning up beings from the underworld."

"Let's get those people out of here. Randy, Tug, be gentle."

That's when I hear a voice and look for the source. I hear it again.

*That one.*

I'm looking at the big man.

A sharp crack like a board breaking catches us all. A blue-white arc of what appears to be electricity jumps among the people, skitters amid the machinery; its endpoints jump about, and then it vanishes.

"Hey, Tug!" shouts Randy. "What was that expression you told me? The one from Korea?"

"Now the shit becomes the shitstorm."

"Perfect."

Then air changes to water.

I can still breathe, but the space around me grows heavy, and as I start toward the big man, instinctively aiming for the shadow of his protection, it's like trying to walk along a pool's bottom. The others move about in fascination, watching their own limbs and checking each other's faces for confirmation of this strangeness.

Light flashes behind the big man as if from a mirror, glinting. He sees me looking—I'm stunned, utterly useless—and by the time he turns, the air has opened, split by light, a crack tilted maybe fifty degrees backward.

Randy points and shouts something, but he might as well be speaking through a wall. His voice is faint, distorted.

The air changes again, suddenly cold—the sweat making sharp lines and patches on my back—and clouded, but less dense, so sound again behaves properly.

"Hoist me up!" Randy cries to Tug, aiming to reach the machine's upper confusions. Tug makes a step of his joined hands beside one upright, and I happen to be gripping another out of absolute confusion, when conditions change again. What had been swirling currents in the air congeal into threads of darker matter that brush against us before settling into enormous, flattened tendrils, the ends widely flared, rooted in the rift at the room's center.

One tendril flails and knocks Randy away from Tug, and then it's clear that the tendrils aren't moving randomly, but with purpose, as another slams atop Tug and two converge on the man himself. Birdy, back from the car, comes running from the far end of the room, his fat-muzzled weapon drawn. He fires at one rearing tendril; after each shot—he fires five times—a bullet drops to the floor.

Tug has somehow twisted free and is pounding away at what held him, but the substance yields in a rubbery way, and, unperturbed, twines around Tug's legs, then shoves against his chest until he's down again, grabbing a metal support for leverage. Likewise pinned now are Birdy and Randy. I'm untouched and still holding an upright, near to the huge crown slowly turning within its network of metal. And all the while, the man himself battles on, striking at two of them, keeping them at bay.

Tug reaches for his backpack, lying open on the floor, and another tendril forms from currents of the air, flashes downward, and immobilizes his arm.

The machine churns, growing ever louder than before; its elements glide and slip and rotate; the breach in the air generates its own sound, an electric hum that climbs in pitch. Then the people, who've remained unmoving all the while, join the cacophony. Their eyes open; their mouths open; the sounds they make, I know too well: they are sounds of human suffering.

The man himself is surrounded and besieged. His shirt tears and his flesh is suddenly striped with blood. As many arms form as are needed to bring him down, all of them rooted in that gaping seam. Even occupied with the physical struggle, tensed and straining, twisting and punching, legs working to gain purchase on the floor, going down to one knee—still the gold-flecked eyes never stop, the great mechanism of his brain continues to seek a solution other than force, since this is a fight he cannot win.

I have seen men fight, under the influence of my work, under the sway of ideology—brave, regretful, puzzled, desperate. Always, I've viewed it at a distance, watching films in small smoke-filled rooms in which the film sometimes caught and tore in the projector. Others helped me analyze what I saw. We discussed how long a person

might fight when in pain. What made someone fearful? When did panic help and when did it hurt? To inspire my work, I sometimes watched those films alone. They appeared to be relics from another world rather than the world I had helped to make. When the film grew taut, it snapped. Often, I had to open the machine and fiddle about till it all ran right again. The smallest misadjustment could jam the mechanism and set fire to the film.

A shout comes from the big man as he's forced down by multiple tendrils, turning, as he falls, to face into the mechanism. I watch those eyes. They take in every aspect of the machine, pause, make a path among the workings. He studies the metal crown near me. Has he found a way to save us all?

To this point, the black tendrils leave me untouched, while my companions labor to survive and the group of people on whom I must have operated suffer some unknown torments. I hesitate before revealing myself.

I call out, "What can I do?"

In all this, he's never once looked at me. And even when I call to him a second time, he doesn't look my way. He has factored me out. His eyes shut and he renews the physical fight with intensified force, for now, rather than keeping him in place, the dark arms are pulling him toward that rip in space. Tug, close by, sees what's happening and briefly throws off the tendril on his back and, though still partly held by his other arm, reaches his friend and grabs him by the wrist before finding himself freshly assaulted.

Randy, too, has freed himself for the moment and catches hold of the big man's other arm; then he grabs an upright just as he's pummeled to the ground.

How, I wonder, do these branching arms know where to reach, when to strike? And then, though there is no voice speaking to me, I realize what part I've played in what's unfolded.

I shut my eyes.

I hear, over the rising exclamations and absurd racket of the device, the shouts between my companions. I hear his voice shout them down.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"I won't do it!" cries Tug.

"Got to be another way!"

"I'll take the fight to them! Then you get the people out of here!"

Randy is nearly screaming. "You don't know what's in there! You can't win in there!"

"They won't expect it!" he says, but of course that's not true, because I can hear his plan and so whatever's coordinating this scheme can hear as well.

His friends keep insisting they won't let go. At last he orders them, audible though not shouting, "Gentlemen. Release me."

I open my eyes. The three men pause, holding on to this moment of decision.

Meanwhile, the machine spins and gasps and keens like a tormented thing and the people trapped in its midst weep with anguish. Now I look where the big man's eyes had looked. Most of the mechanism works with tremendous speed, but not the turning crown near me. I think how perhaps the world is ending and that wheel is like the world, or like another version of the world making its way into existence, riding strangely on its axis into the future, each spoke moving below the bar that holds the metal flap, each slow tick of that flap on the teeth another step toward that awful future world. I see that I might stop that world from coming.

I step quickly to a place above the crown and cock my knee, aiming between the spokes and just against the bar above it. My shoe catches briefly on the metal wheel as I jam my leg through, and I shut my eyes as if that might keep the voice in my head from knowing what I've done. Blindly, I grab a nearby support with

both hands and brace myself—against what's coming and against the urge to pull free my leg.

Something heavy slams against my head, turns me awkwardly, twisting my back, but I hold on.

I hear the man himself shout. "Lukic!" I resist looking. I think he's going to tell me to free myself. He's going to tell me to let him bear the burden. "Lukic! Look at me!"

They've been tearing at his head, these living branches, and his face is turned partly away, but his eyes are on me. He's digging in again, straining forward, rubber-soled shoes gripping the floor.

"Look at me!" he shouts again. "And don't look away! Don't look away!" Several ten-drils leave him now and go to work on me. One slides below my foot and pushes upward, but already my leg is locked between the spoke and the bar. "Don't look away!"

Thoughtless and panicked, I do it, and then the first sharp pain cuts me and I understand him. I scream, but he shouts above it, "I'm here! I'm here! Look at me! Don't look away!"

I have never been strong, never used strength. I do not believe I have strength—not like his, in any case. Even so, I cannot be dislodged. The pain pours upward and shakes me like electricity, but I hold on. The scream shrills out from me, but I keep my eyes on the man himself.

The rotating crown labors to advance . . . and then it stops.

Many things happen at once. The rift snaps shut, cutting off the sound from that other realm, and, the machine stopped and silent too, there's only the frying hiss of the black tentacles laced about the room, and the one still in the great man's grip, as they are rendered into dust. Black particulate settles toward the floor but fades to nothing before contact.

"Get them out of here!" he tells his companions. "Fast!" Tug grabs two people, one under each arm, and hurries away. Randy throws another man over his back.

"Birdy's still down!" calls Randy.

"Check him! And grab the tools!"

At last I let go of the beam and tip sideways across the metal bar. I look away from the blood. The big man is over me, uncomfortably close. I can't catch my breath; I can only breathe his exhalations. "I wasn't insane," I say.

"No. No, you weren't."

"You couldn't have known," I say. Blacks veins crowd inward from the edge of my vision, and my head and fingers feel shockingly cold.

My body lies submerged in an icy dampness. I barely feel—though I do feel—his hand clasp mine. My consciousness flickers and my one regret, strange for all I should regret, is how I won't live to contemplate the sky rich with stars. Black bands stream inward, but I hold his hand and feel myself enmeshed in something larger than my frail body, larger than this room and this city, enfolded in some pattern I'll never understand. "Hold on," the big man says, and then his golden face goes dark.

## 6. Weight

Uncle Simon, Birdy's children call me. The girl is five, the boy three. Babysitting has become a way of remembering my own childhood, which was, after a fashion, happy. The circumstances, in any case, were happy, though my way of seeing cost me any binding love of family or feelings of joy. I barely knew those people, and then they were gone.

I work in Birdy's office at his private practice in Minnetonka. The normalcy of the neighborhood, the orderliness of its ordinariness, disturbs me nearly as much as my

memories of the Soviet prisons. Birdy dislikes it too, having grown up in the countryside, but says to give it time.

Those voices were like a conversation with a companion who had little to say. I did most of the talking. As it turns out, they were listening.

Maybe the first breathings of those voices were only me, but later, they were something else, and my already diminished will slid into a hole. Much of my memory of that time remains enshrouded.

Theories have been expounded: Perhaps I inhaled some of those carbon tubes and they lodged themselves in my brain—at least, that's Birdy's hypothesis. The big man's view is less scientific. He believes I'm just "susceptible." And here I'd thought myself so single-minded. He once said to me, "A man who hears only one voice isn't sane either."

They still come, the voices. Not every day, but often enough that I can't let down my guard. I'm still figuring out who the person is that inhabits this body, but I'm insisting that there will be only the one. The old self cannot return, and no alien others will take its place.

On his most recent visit, we meet in the screened back porch at Birdy's house and watch squirrels compete with birds at the feeders in the yard. The Birdwells' children sit on either of the big man's feet and hold his calves.

"So the voices won't ever go away?" I ask.

"Likely not. Consider them . . . a temptation."

"A temptation."

"Everyone has them." Left leg first, where the girl holds on, he straightens his leg, then drops it fast and lifts the other, giving the boy a ride. He speeds up, slows down, surprising the children, making them squeal.

"Even you?" I ask. "Tempted."

"Of course."

"So what's your weakness? What tempts you?"

He answers immediately. "Pride. The belief that I can do the Work on my own." He bounces his legs like pistons, then grabs the children. He stands abruptly, hoisting them high. He puts his massive head between theirs and they kiss him.

I've asked him what he thinks was planned. Was the rift meant for something to come through? Had it all been a plan to attack him?

"Perhaps our stopping you in New York changed their plans," he says. "The focus shifted to me. Or it didn't. But unless they try again, we'll never know. Life is full of mysteries."

"Some are terrifying."

"Yes, they are."

Several times a day, I slide up my pant leg and study the machinery. Fine work, work worthy of the man, or of any human artificer. Often, I fall into a trance, thinking of the more complex and profound mechanisms ranging through my body that make possible the observing mind and pondering soul. One could study these arrangements into eternity. And so they fall away from us the harder we look.

Then I return to seeing my leg, this memento of my time with the man himself. We are made of mean materials. Carbon. Water. Animated, we move about, we blunder about. We strive.

Though I'm in better health now than ever in my life, I'm still not a man the uninformed observer would consider strong. Yet neither would a stranger guess what I've lived through. My impairment barely slows me down.

It is not more than I can bear. O

# THE FNOOR HEN

Rudy Rucker

Rudy Rucker, who returns to our pages with another fun story about biological nanotech run wild, is a writer and a mathematician who worked for twenty years as a Silicon Valley computer science professor. He received the Philip K. Dick award for his novels *Software* and *Wetware*, which were recently reissued as part of the Ware Trilogy. His autobiographical memoir, *Nested Scrolls: A Writer's Life*, is appearing this year, as is his latest novel, *Jim and the Flims*. In recent times, Rudy has taken up painting, and has had three shows in San Francisco. More information is at Rudy's blog, [www.rudyrucker.com/blog](http://www.rudyrucker.com/blog).

**V**icky was a cheerful, lively woman, given to moments of deep inattention. She had a strong sense of fashion, and she made the most of her slim wardrobe. Her cute husband Bix worked as a freelance programmer, picking up a couple of contracts a year, and Vicky earned a little money teaching yoga classes at a studio off Valencia Street in San Francisco. The biggest factor in their lives these days was their two-year-old son, whom they'd named Stoke. The name had been a last-minute inspiration.

One rainy Tuesday afternoon in April, Vicky met up with Bix and Stoke at a funky coffee shop called the Scavenger. The Scavenger was a good place to hang, and it was near the spot where Vicky taught. A hyperactive guy named Cardo ran the place, and you could buy his third-hand furniture right off the floor if you wanted.

Cardo was a study in contrasts. His family back in Manila ran a business called Gloze, which made quick-turn-around knock-offs of the latest biogadgets. Gloze was supporting Cardo as their San Francisco rep, but instead of renting an office, Cardo had chosen to open a grungy coffee shop for his workspace. He looked like a thirty-something businessman, in that he wore shirts with collars and had his hair slicked back. But he lived like an impoverished slacker, and spent most of his time talking about the new pepster music.

As it happened, Cardo and his wife Maricel lived just a few doors away from Vicky and her husband. Quite recently, Bix had been doing some consulting for Cardo and Gloze, but last week there'd been a falling out—Bix wanted extra money for something unexpected he'd discovered. Cardo would have been willing to give Bix the bonus, but his family back in Manila wouldn't approve the overage. So Bix had resigned, sort of—even though he was still hanging out in the Scavenger, and even though he'd kept his not-actually-in-production-yet Gloze squidskin computer. Cardo still had a biogadget link for copying Bix's work off his rectangle of autonomous cephalopod tissue. But for now, Bix had stopped telling Cardo how to use his cryptic new program.

"Mama!" piped Stoke, noticing Vicky the instant she stepped into the coffee shop. Bix

was fiddling with his polka-dotted Gloze squidskin. Father and son were sprawled on a fat vinyl couch.

Bix smiled up at Vicky, cheerful as usual. He never seemed to mind taking care of the tot—if anything, two-year-olds were closer to Bix’s wavelength than were most grown-ups. Employed or not, Bix was pushing forward with the discoveries he’d made on the Gloze prototype. Something about using pictures to model real-world systems. Bix called his new program a morphon muncher.

“Hiiiii,” said Vicky, making her way across the room.

“Tweety!” called little Stoke with a wild laugh.

“You didn’t show him those ancient Tweety and Sylvester videos, did you, Bix?” asked Vicky, flopping down with her family. “Those old-time cartoons are so violent. So unaware. And kind of seedy, don’t you think?”

“Birdseed,” said Bix in his idea of Tweety’s voice. “Actually we’re munching morphons. Stoke just *thinks* this one looks like Tweety. It’s a model of the Shanghai stock exchange. Cardo’s family are especially hot for me to explain this one.” Stoke was poking Bix’s squidskin, slowly warping the bulbous canary-yellow shape.

“You’re always talking about morphons these days,” said Vicky, feeling cozy with the vague old word, which had something to do with chaos or math. “And I thought people just used morphons on T-shirts anymore. Hi Stokie.” She loved the sight and sound and scent of her husband and her little boy.

“Morphons are due for a huge comeback,” said Bix. “Even though the *old* morphons are too obvious. Homeless stoners draw them in chalk on the sidewalk. But my new morphons—”

“A fashion tsunami!” said Vicky. “Right, Stoke? A big, big *wave*!” She raised her voice an octave and bounced the couch cushions to make Stoke giggle.

“I’m paddling into position,” said Bix. “I’m building my morphon muncher into a universal emulator! As of today, I can flip my morphons into superexponential mode and the screen shudders and pukes Jello-cube pixels the size of your thumb. And each of them stands for something real. In a few minutes I’m gonna use this demo for another try at convincing Cardo’s stingy-ass relatives to pay me the bonus.” Bix glanced over to where Cardo sat behind the counter with earbuds on, poking at his phone slug and dancing in his seat.

“The practical core,” said Vicky, smiling at Bix. “The method behind his seeming madness.”

“Tweety bonk!” said Stoke, leaning in close to Bix and smacking the squidskin’s screen as hard as he could.

The yellow blob splattered and rearranged itself, taking on the appearance of a spiky sea-urchin. Endless parades of pastel elephants were marching into the slits between the sea-urchin’s spikes. Ragged St. Elmo’s fire swept up into the masts and the rigging that reticulated the space outside the urchin.

“Nobody could compute like this before the squidskins,” said Bix. “Our society ignored universal dynamics for thirty or forty years, see, and while we were gone, the morphons grew wild in our vacant lots. They got all crooked and stinky.”

“Papa stinky,” chortled Stoke, and Bix made a shocked face that sent the boy into happy laughter.

“What’s all that pink junk under the sea-urchin shape?” asked Vicky, getting interested in the image on Bix’s screen. “It looks odd there. Like fish eggs? With little starfish in the eggs.”

“I call that kind of stuff *fnoor*,” said Bix. “Batshit weirdness, seething dog barf, morphons to the max. It shows up where your virtual world is being clipped by computational constraints. The fnoor is indirectly telling me to ramp up my paravirtualization so that my apps are running full-tilt on the Gloze bare meat.”

“Too much coffee for you,” said Vicki, finishing Bix’s cup. “Paravirtualization?

Maybe I can use that word when I talk to my yoga students about getting in touch with their—bare meat?"

"The physical reality underlying the illusion," said Bix. "The embodied wetware."

Vicky looked around the friendly coffee shop, with all the lively people doing stuff together, techies and bums, the words and smells in the air, the dusty furniture, the nurturing rain running down the windowpanes, and the big city spring stirring outside, green sprouts in all the cracks of the alleys. It was nice to be here with her son and her man, her muscles loose and relaxed from her class.

"Real life is my favorite illusion," said Vicky, giving Stoke a hug.

"And underneath it—" began Bix.

"A beautiful dance," said Vicky. "You should turn off your squidskin and your phone slug and come to yoga class sometimes. Ready to go home and help Mama, Stoke?"

Bix went over to buttonhole Cardo, and Vicky took Stoke back to their tiny house on a steep, dead-end street in the Mission. Bix had managed to buy it five years ago, after a contract-programming gig for a successful start-up that had paid him in stock.

The house was kind of a dump, but Bix had made it nice. He'd replaced the rotten floorboards in the kitchen and knocked out some crazy-making interior walls—he'd painted, roofed, plumbed, and wired. He'd built a wooden deck in front, and when the weather was good, he and Vicky put furniture on the deck and driveway and lived outside like Pacific islanders.

But with a two-year-old, on a cold or rainy day, the house was tight. And if they were to have more children like they wanted to—well, really they needed to find a bigger place. But the prices were so insane. The housing situation was like some unsolvable sliding-blocks problem or word rebus revolving in your head as you tossed and turned through a long night of fever-dreams. Vicky tried not to go there.

In any case, they were happy in their house for now and Bix—dreamy, optimistic Bix—had been refinishing the attic, even though the roof up there only rose to about four feet above the floor, and every couple of yards there was a cross-bar that you had to crawl under or step over. Bix had added flooring and a couple of vents and a skylight. To get to the attic, you had to climb an aluminum stepladder that Bix had set up beneath the crawl hole in the ceiling of their little hall.

Sometimes, after a long day of work and child-care, Bix would ascend to the attic with his music player and hang out. "It's rather comfortable, if you lie flat on the floor," he'd calmly say. "I can imagine people paying to go into a nightclub like that. A room that's only four feet high, with a head-or-shin-bonking rafter every few steps. Party!" For her part, Vicky had only gone in the attic once. She didn't like being cramped.

When Vicky and Stoke got back from the Scavenger, it was late afternoon and Stoke was a little fussy. Vicky helped him build some block towers, and then she got supper started.

When Bix showed up, they shared one of their home-brewed beers. Their circle of friends were into do-it-yourself, like urban pioneers. It was a counterbalance for the ubiquitous biogadgets.

"So how was your talk with Cardo?" asked Vicky.

"He's got no clue about business negotiation," said Bix, shaking his head. "All he really wants is to be a DJ in a Manila nightclub. When we talk about business, he's just parroting whatever his aunts and uncles say."

"Which is?"

"Oh—that Gloze owns my new morphon muncher because I developed it on their machine. And that it's my legal duty to give Gloze a user's guide to the program. I'm really eager to talk about the morphon muncher, actually—if I don't explain it to someone pretty soon I might forget how. It's that slippery. But I want money so we

can think about a bigger house. Negotiating with Cardo is impossible. He should go back to the Philippines and run a pepster music club like he wants to."

"I think his wife Maricel's a little cold and unfriendly, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Bix. "I just hope Cardo and his family don't try something weird on me. It was almost like Cardo was hinting at that today."

"Things will look better after we eat." They sat down and shared the vegetable stew Vicky had made, with Stoke doing pretty well with his rice and beans.

"Uh-oh, I left the chickens loose," observed Bix as they finished the meal. He'd built a henhouse against the back wall of their home, and they'd installed four hens, each a slightly different color.

Most days Bix or Vicky would let the chickens out of their coop to range around the wonderfully overgrown backyard pecking up seeds and bugs. It was fun to watch how a hen would scratch with her claws down under her fat body. After scratching, she'd mincingly walk backward and cock her head to see what she might have unearthed. Like a businesswoman checking the messages on her phone slug.

It wasn't a good idea to leave the chickens out overnight—all sorts of creatures thought of chickens as being lower than them on the food chain. Dogs, cats, rats . . . and the occasional rogue phone slug.

"Help Papa catch the chickies!" Bix told Stoke.

The boys were outside for a few minutes, then came back in laughing.

"In the tree!" Stoke told his mother, throwing his little arms into the air. "Chicken in the tree!"

"We couldn't find them *anywhere*," said Bix, dramatizing for the sake of the boy. "And then Stoke heard cheeping, and he looked up and saw them . . ."

"In the tree," said Stoke in his sturdy little voice. "High."

"Roosting in a row," said Bix. "One, two, three, four. They look smarter than before. We left them there."

"Papa found an egg!" added Stoke, and indeed Bix had a nice big egg in his hand. He set it down on the kitchen counter.

"For breakfast," said Bix. "That's the first egg this spring."

"You have to roost now," Vicky told Stoke. "I'll make a nest for you in your room."

Once Stoke was in his pajamas, Vicky lay down on his bed with him to read.

"What book do you want?"

"Read the cans and boxes," said Stoke. His big thing this week was hauling food cans and packaged goods into his room. If you took them back out into the kitchen or the living-room, Stoke would fetch them again. Wearying of the routine, Bix and Vicky had left a mound of the packages heaped by Stoke's bookcase. "Read a box," repeated Stoke.

"Okay," said Vicky.

The lists and ad copy were pretty dull, but Stoke seemed to get a kick out of the fact that book-type words were on these colorful little containers. And Vicky made the most of the jaw-breakers among the ingredients—some of them as unlikely as anything invented by Dr. Seuss.

The brightest label of all was on the slick paper bag of the Ultra Egg shell supplement that Cardo's wife Maricel had given Bix the day before yesterday. Supposedly it made the chickens' eggshells stronger. While reading out the contents of the sack, Vicky noticed an odd patch in the picture on the bag, which showed a nest with three gleaming "ultra eggs." One of the eggs was broken open, and standing behind it was something not quite like a chicken. A dark, overly cross-hatched shape that reminded Vicky of the fish-roe junk beneath Bix's sea-urchin morphon.

"Fnooor," said Stoke, pointing at the image of the strange hatchling, almost as if he'd read Vicky's mind. These days, the boy heard and remembered everything. He was like a magpie snatching up words for his own use.

After Vicky got Stoke to sleep, she had a talk with Bix. "Stoke shouldn't have this Ultra Egg junk in his room. Where did Maricel get it, anyway? The label says it's seaweed, calcium, and proprietary memory proteins. And there's a weird picture of a monster chicken on the bag." She tossed the shiny sack onto Bix's stomach. He was lying on the couch messing with his Gloze squidskin.

"Maricel says she's starting a line of chicken vitamins in San Francisco," said Bix, not looking away from his shimmering display. "Even though she really wants to be an artist. Back in the Philippines, Cardo's family makes biogadgets and Maricel's family makes chicken feed. Maricel told me she hand-painted the illo and used her ink-lizard to print copies for the labels. She's proud of it."

"Her picture has fnoor in it," said Vicky, raising her eyebrows.

That got Bix's attention. He laid the floppy Gloze on the floor and began studying the Ultra Egg label. "Wow," he said, after a bit. "I hadn't really looked at this. You're right, Vicky. That weird chicken by the nest, it's, I dunno, call it a fnoor hen? Those feathers on its leg spiral into an endless regress. Like on a morphon. Legs on legs on legs. And it has extra eyes on its—"

"Why's it on the label? What does it mean?"

Bix held the sack up at an angle, turning it this way and that. "Well—I have been showing my morphons to Cardo and Maricel, you know. While repeatedly asking for my bonus."

"Or maybe Maricel thought it up on her own," said Vicky. "Why assume that everything interesting comes from biogadgets?"

"Okay," said Bix after a moment's thought. "Sure. I think Maricel even had some gallery shows back in Manila. She's dying to go back there. I've heard her get pretty intense about off-the-grid Filipino stuff like shamanic healers." He studied the picture some more. "But figuring out that pattern—oh well. Enough thinking for one day. Let's drink beer and watch the godseye." The godseye was the global feed from the by-now-ubiquitous video cameras. You could always find something interesting there.

Bix and Vicky watched the seething biogadgets discarded in the local dump, then a high-school dance in Nairobi, then a new band in the Mission, then two black bears having sex, and then they went to bed, forgetting all about Maricel's Ultra Egg picture. But the next morning, things got strange.

Stoke and Vicky were at the tiny kitchen table, the boy gnawing a bagel with cream cheese and Vicky eating a bowl of granola with milk. Bix stood by the stove, ready to scramble the egg he'd brought in last night. But when he broke the shell, something dark hopped out of the egg and onto the counter.

Vicky let out a cry, and the shaken Bix threw the egg shells into the air. The thing on the counter—was it a rat? No, it was matte black with too many legs—a spider? No—it was squawking.

"A fnoor hen!" exclaimed Bix. "Like that thing we saw on the Ultra Egg label."

"Be careful, Bix!"

There seemed to be no real body at the fnoor hen's center, just a dark core with little bowls of light. The hen hopped off the counter, jerkily flexing her multi-jointed legs.

"I don't want to get bited," cried Stoke. He clambered from his chair onto the table, spilling Vicky's bowl of cereal.

The fnoor hen veered away from the breakfast nook. Bix tossed a colander after her, meaning to trap her under it. But the fnoor hen was too fast. With a peremptory cluck, she sped across their living-room and into the little hall by the two bedrooms. The aluminum rattled as the fnoor hen scrabbled upward.

"She's going into our attic!" Vicky wailed.

"I'll get her," said Bix, sounding more excited than scared.

While Stoke and Vicky watched, Bix slowly climbed the ladder, jokingly wearing

the colander on his head. He reached into the attic's access hole and turned on the light.

"Oh, wow," said Bix, still on the ladder. "The fnoor hen's grown." He raised his voice an octave. "Good chicken. I'm going to take you outside." He climbed higher and disappeared into the attic.

Vicky heard a fuzzy *whoosh*, followed by—silence.

"Bix?" she called. "Bix? Don't tease me! You're okay, aren't you?"

The fnoor hen was faintly clucking.

"Stay back," Vicky told Stoke. "Don't get near the ladder."

Vicky fetched the broom from the kitchen and, screwing up her courage, she climbed the ladder just high enough so that her head protruded into the attic. She saw the fnoor hen resting at the attic's center, considerably larger than before, a brooding tangle of spangled legs. And no Bix.

"Where is he?" Vicky demanded, shoving her broom toward the strange, dark shape. With a hostile caw, the fnoor hen shook out her feathery limbs—they were starting to look more like tornados than feathers. The hen was nearly six feet across by now, a storm of dark patterns with curved globs of light. Was that Bix's limber silhouette inside one of the lights?

Vicky hurled her broom at the fnoor hen. The broom tumbled over and over, slowing down and seeming to grow smaller as it approached the ungainly chicken-thing. One of those tornado legs twitched toward the broom, warping it into a crooked pattern and sucking it up.

Hands trembling, Vicky backed down the ladder without bothering to close the attic's pitifully thin trapdoor.

"Where's Papa?" asked Stoke, staring up at Vicky.

"We'll ask Maricel about this," said Vicky, working to keep her voice under control. She took Stoke's hand and grabbed the bag of Ultra Egg shell supplement from the floor by the couch. "Let's go." The real chickens were loose in the yard, alertly watching.

Maricel and Cardo lived two doors further uphill, in a house even smaller than Vicky's. Cardo didn't actually draw much pay from his family. Yesterday's rain had stopped and the early morning clouds were breaking up.

"Welcome, dudette," said Maricel from the stuffed old armchair on her porch. As usual, she was fiddling with her phone slug, which was shaped like one end of a banana. Maricel was a punk-looking woman with purpled, ratty hair—five years younger than Vicky and not entirely friendly.

"Want some candy, Stoke?" said Maricel. "How about some wine, Vicky?" Cardo and Maricel didn't have children.

"I'm here because of this crap," snapped Vicky. She held up the bag of Ultra Egg. "It did something to our chickens, and they laid a weird egg with a black gremlin inside. Bix calls it a fnoor hen. The fnoor hen climbed into our attic and—and I think she swallowed Bix."

"Aha," said Maricel, rising to her feet. "Your—your 'fnoor hen' looks like the picture on my label? Wow. Cardo's Aunt Perla was right. I should message her. Maybe I could use this for a new show back in—"

"You knew this would happen?"

"Sometimes in Manila people get visitations from shaggy creepy things," said Maricel, wriggling her skinny fingers. "We call them devils. You might see a devil if you get on the wrong side of a shaman healer who does psychic surgery—or if you cheat on a certain kind of business person."

"A devil?" echoed Vicky, utterly confused.

"You're not spiritual at all?" asked the younger woman.

"I teach yoga," allowed Vicky. "But I'm not what you'd call—"

"Your husband acts awfully occult about his computer work," said Maricel in an insinuating tone. "He's been showing Cardo and me these tasty morphon muncher graphics at the Scavenger cafe all week and he keeps using that funny word that you just said."

"Fnoor?" said Vicky. "Bix says his gnarliest morphons have fnoor."

"Right. And Bix won't teach Cardo how to use the morphon muncher for anything that's actually valuable. Sure, Cardo has a copy of the protein sequences that run the morphon muncher—but Bix wants extra money for a user's guide. Even though Bix developed his morphon muncher on the Gloze squidskin that Cardo lent him. Even though Bix signed a consulting contract. And Cardo's family is upset about that. So Cardo's Aunt Perla had this idea for a swarm-like biogadget using the source-code proteins from Bix. A high-tech devil. A DNA devil, you might say." Maricel gave a cold little smile.

"What do you mean?"

"Cardo's Aunt Perla amplified the morphon muncher code molecules into a few ounces of tasty protein—with a some shakedown-type instructions added in. She phone-ordered the protein build from a biogadget shop right here in town. I mixed the stuff with seaweed and chalk, and tricked Bix into feeding it to your chickens."

"Wait," said Vicky, staring at Maricel's hard, impudent face. "Wait. You're talking about the Ultra Egg shell supplement?"

"A special formula for you and Bix," said Maricel evenly. "Frankly I'm as surprised as you are that it worked. Most people think Perla's crazy."

"You mutated our chickens?" exclaimed Vicky. "You made them hatch that weird egg? And you knew there'd be a monster inside it?"

"Hey, we only tried it as a last resort," said Maricel. "Bix has been so greedy. But don't worry, I can help fix it now." Maricel lit a cigarette and fetched a bag of shiny string from inside her house. "Let's go," she said, with her phone slug clutched in her hand. "And tell me more about your fnoor hen, why don't you?"

"She's all legs with no head, and she has spots of light buried inside her," said Vicky as they hurried downhill with Stoke in their wake. "I think I saw Bix inside one of the lights."

"Can you understand anything that your fnoor hen is saying?" asked Maricel, coughing a little from her cigarette. "She's meant to be like a bill collector, see."

"She clucks and squawks like a chicken."

"What it is—she's programmed to make Bix give her a tutorial on the morphon muncher," said Maricel. "Once she gets that, she'll move on. At least that's what Aunt Perla claims." Maricel paused on the sidewalk, prodding her phone slug. "Perla's line is down, dammit. The biogadget services in Manila are so—"

"I want my husband back, Maricel. I can't believe you and your family are such . . . such criminals. You're going to risk my husband's life over some stupid squidskin program? Here we are. Oh god, I left the front door open and—"

Their four real chickens had wandered inside and were standing in the living room, dropping white spots of poop on the rug and pecking at the books. In a sudden surge of fury, Vicky charged at them and drove them outside.

Meanwhile Stoke was explaining things to Maricel. "Weird chicken," said Stoke, pointing toward the hole above the ladder. "Ate Papa."

"Bix?" called Vicky one more time. The only answer was a brooding cackle from above. Maricel was about to start in on her phone slug again. "Hey!" yelled Vicky. "Are you gonna help me or not?"

Maricel shoved her phone slug into her pocket, took a skein of orange cord from her bag and tied off a loop. "Put this on your fingers, Vicky. We'll make a wetware calling-card. It'll tell the devil to talk to you as well as Bix."

"Huh?"

"It's gonna look like a—a cat's cradle? This string is smart protein cable, see. We

pass the loop back and forth. That's right. Pinch those two crossings and spread your fingers. Now let me take it back and—"

Stoke wanted to mix into the game, but the women kept the emerging pattern out of his reach. After a couple of minutes, they'd woven a shape like a tube, wide at one end and thin at the other, with Vicky wearing the tube like a crumpled sleeve on her left arm.

"Just feed this into your fnoor hen," said Maricel.

"I'm not sure about getting close to that thing," said Vicky doubtfully. "You called it a DNA devil? You and Cardo sent this devil to eat Bix, and now maybe it's supposed to eat me!"

"Oh, don't be trippin'. We're still friends. Bix just has to make good on his consulting deal. Our DNA devil is a harmless fog of biogadgets. Like a swarm of tiny bugs."

"More like a hurricane," said Vicky. "When I threw my broom at your devil—at the fnoor hen—the broom warped and dissolved."

"You're a smart woman," said Maricel with a shrug. "You and the hen will work something out."

"At least make sure that Stoke doesn't follow me up the ladder," said Vicky. "Okay, Maricel? Don't get all distracted with your phone slug." Vicky hunkered down and looked into Stoke's bright eyes. "You wait down here while Mama goes to get Papa from the attic, okay?"

"I help?"

"Stay down here, Stokie. Good boy. I love you."

With her heart hammering against her ribs, Vicky crept up the ladder and into the attic, stepping over the shin-bonking rafters. The sounds from the house faded away. The space of the attic was filled with an intricately patterned hiss.

The fnoor hen was yet larger than before, perhaps eight feet across and four feet high, squeezed right up against the sloping underside of the little house's roof. Her dark body was like twisting ropes of smoke, a chiaroscuro of grays and blacks with the spots of light like nests in a tree. That lively little silhouette within the closest light—yes, that was Bix. Why didn't he come back out?

The fnoor hen puffed herself up and made a staccato chirrup. Vicky extended her left arm with its goofy tangle of protein-string and tossed the free end out past her fingers and into contact with the fuzzy border of the hen.

The mesh came alive when it touched the shifting mass of fnoor. The orange strings twitched and glowed. Eldritch energies flowed through Vicky's body and branched into her brain. And, just as Maricel had predicted, Vicky could hear the fnoor hen's voice in her head.

"Lonely, lonely," the fnoor hen was saying. She sounded like a fussy old woman fretting to herself. "No chicko-chicks to play with me."

"Hello?" said Vicky in a quiet tone.

"Talking monkey! I have your mate."

"Let him go," said Vicky.

"Come and lie with him," said the fnoor hen with a creepy giggle. "Come stay with me." She drew in the protein-string mesh, slurping it up like spaghetti, leaving Vicky's arm bare. And now she sent her vortices to draw Vicky in as well. Feeling dreamy and passive, Vicky let it happen.

The hen's interior was like a moist rainy jungle—filled with rustles, whoops and tweets. The sounds fit together in a wonderfully precise way, like the notes of a symphony. Glowing white flowers hovered amid the tangled vines, their scent indescribably lush. A stick-thin creature was perched in a flower cup nearby. Oh wait, that was—

"Vicky," said the sketchy form. "Come to me."

"Bix!" cried Vicky, trying to keep her head together. She was dizzy from the blos-

som's perfume and from the architectonic cloud of sound. There was much more room inside the fnoor hen than she'd expected. She felt as if she were only a few inches long, like a mantis or a dragonfly—

"Buzz up," said Bix, as if reading her mind.

With a few rapid flaps of her arms, Vicky rose to Bix's creamy flower-bowl. She perched beside him and they embraced, twining their arms and legs together. They made love, reached their climax, and lolled against the smooth petals. For some incalculable length of time, Vicky lounged there, speechless, drunk with pleasure, no longer thinking in words at all, knowing only that she was with her one true love.

The crying brought Vicky back. She sat up and dragged herself to the edge of the flower cup, which by now loomed as large as a gymnasium.

"Mama! Papa!"

"Stoke!" called Vicky, but her voice was so thin and high that the boy didn't hear her. He was outside the fnoor hen, standing alone on the dusty plain of the attic floor.

"I'm glad you two came for me," said Bix, hauling himself up to Vicky's side. "My little family."

"What have you been doing in here all this time?" asked Vicky. "I'm confused."

"I was thinking about my morphon muncher," said Bix. "Feeding a user's guide to the fnoor hen."

"Why?"

"Because—because it felt good? And talking to her helped me understand my work in a new way? The fnoor hen has a funny way of playing on your feelings. It's kind of wonderful in here."

"But it's terrible, too," said Vicky, as the two of them absent-mindedly slid back into the flower cup. Vicky had a definite feeling that she'd just now forgotten something important—but for the moment she couldn't say what.

"Terrible," echoed Bix. "At least I've been figuring out about the hen while I've been talking to her. I know how to give her some new tasks. She'll help me, now that I gave her what she was after."

"Mama!" called Stoke again—and Vicky remembered what she'd forgotten.

Stoke's presence was like a beacon. Guiding themselves toward his bright vibrations, Vicky and Bix found their way out of the fnoor jungle within the hen.

Vicky hurried across the attic floor to hug her son. And when the hen tried to come after them, Bix made some fancy gestures with his hands, smoothing out the fnoor hen, molding her down to the size and shape of a—

"Tweety bird!" said Stoke over Vicky's shoulder, admiring his father's craft. The fnoor hen had even taken on an iridescent yellow sheen.

"Our friend now," said Bix, cradling the reshaped fnoor hen.

Smoke was drifting up from downstairs. "Hey, Maricel!" yelled Vicky, peering down through the trapdoor.

"Oh, uh, just a minute," said Maricel, wandering into view. She was having another cigarette. She glanced up at Vicky. "All set now? I've got Cardo on the phone slug. He's coming right over. Oh—I'm sorry, did little Stoke climb up there?"

"Maricel, you get your scheming ass out of here," yelled Vicky, coming down the ladder with Stoke right behind her.

"We're not done," said Maricel. "Not till Cardo gets his morphon muncher user's guide."

"You'll get it all right," said Bix, descending the ladder with the yellow little fnoor hen perched on his shoulder. He walked outside and set the odd little form on a perch inside the henhouse that was attached to their house's outer wall. The four regular chickens crowded in there too, wanting to check out the fnoor hen. Bix shut the little door, closing them in together.

Cardo arrived then, bopping down the sidewalk in a cloud of pepster music.

"Where's my bird?" he asked Bix.

"She's roosting in my henhouse for a minute," said Bix. "She told me she'd tidy it up."

"We're all cool?" said Cardo. "You gave her the user's guide?"

"Yeah," said Bix. "And then she asked me what she should do next. I gave her two more tasks. You want to hear about the task that applies to you?"

"Don't go threatening me," said Cardo, slicking back his hair. "I carry a gun. And, look, you gotta hand over your squidskin computer, too. Aunt Perla doesn't want you working with Gloze at all anymore."

"I have it here," called Maricel, coming out of the house with the iridescent tablet in her grip.

"Fine," said Bix. "I don't need it anymore. I know the code by heart. And now it's time for you guys to leave."

"Look!" yelled Stoke.

The henhouse door had opened halfway and the fnoor hen was fluttering out with her wings a tiny Tweety-bird blur. She changed shape as she moved, growing bigger again—a lot bigger. She caught Maricel and Cardo in fleshy claws made of a zillion tiny biogadgets bunched together.

"Put us down," yelled Cardo.

Stoke ran to Vicky and climbed into her arms.

"Relax," Bix told Cardo over the beating of the great fnoor hen's wings. "The bird's taking you two home to the Philippines. Just like you've been wanting all along."

"Let's go for it, Cardo," cried Maricel.

"Oh, why not," said Cardo, breaking into a grin. "What the hell."

"We'll need a place to live there," Maricel yelled to Bix. "Can the fnoor hen bring our house?"

"Sure," said Bix. "I guess. Do it, fnoor hen."

Growing to the size of a dragon, the fnoor hen buzzed up the block, dropping a couple of feathers the size of palm fronds. Quickly the feathers dissolved into swarms of gnat-like biogadgets that flew up the street then rejoined the mother hen.

With delicate motions of her huge claws, the fnoor hen set Cardo and Maricel on the porch of their cracker-box house. And then she yanked the house loose from its moorings. They rose into the sky—a winged cabin with Cardo and Maricel waving from the porch.

"Wow," said Vicky. "And what was the other task?"

"More room for our family," said Bix.

He marched over to the henhouse and swung its door wide open. The henhouse ceiling bulged up like the custard in a Dairy Queen cone, swirling upward toward a central point. The four chickens were fluttering around in the vasty interior, flustered and lost.

"Oh my god," said Vicky, peering over Bix's shoulder. "It's gone bulbous. Like the inside of a Moscow onion dome! The henhouse is as big as our real house!"

"The fnoor hen warped the space for us," said Bix. "This way we won't have to move! I'll take off a couple of weeks and work on the place. Put in some flooring, maybe. Wires and pipes. Build a door to connect the dome room to our living-room. And I'll make a new henhouse for you chickens, okay?"

The chickens flapped out to perch again on the tree. They really did look smarter than before.

"You need a rest from the programming," said Vicky. "You were going too far."

"I need a month or two with you," agreed Bix. "And then—the *meta morphon* muncher."

"And the fashion tsunami," said Vicky, kissing her husband's stubbled cheek. ○

# SMOKE CITY

Christopher Barzak

Christopher Barzak is the author of *One for Sorrow*, a Crawford Award winner, and *The Love We Share Without Knowing*, a Nebula nominee for best novel. Christopher wrote the surreal "Smoke City" when he studied the history of Pittsburgh from its geological formations to its acquiring of human residents, and through the ages when humans of various places fought over it. "I was struck by the period of time in which the city was industrialized, a period that is very Steampunk, rickety-click, and how the lives of the majority of the people were rather desperate due to the normalization of exploitation, something that is not unfamiliar today."

One night, I woke to the sound of my mother's voice, as I did when I was a child. The words were familiar to my ear, they matched the voice that formed them, but it was not until I had opened my eyes to the dark of my room and my husband's snoring that I remembered the words were calling me away from my warm bed and the steady breathing of my children, both asleep in their own rooms across the hall. "Because I could not stop for death," my mother used to tell me, "he kindly stopped for me." They were Dickinson's words, of course, not my mother's, but she said them as if they were hers, and because of that, they were hers, and because of that, they are now mine, passed down with every other object my mother gave me before I left for what I hoped would be a better world. "Here, take this candy dish." Her hands pushing the red knobbed glass into my hands. "Here, take this sweater." Her hands folding it, a made thing, pulled together by her hands, so that I could lift it and lay it on the seat as my car pulled me away. Her hand lifted into the air above her cloud of white hair behind me. The smoke of that other city enveloping her, putting it behind me, trying to put it behind me, until I had the words in my mouth again, like a bit, and then the way opened up beneath me, a fissure through which I slipped, down through the bed sheets, no matter how I grasped at them, down through the mattress, down through the floorboards, down, down, down, through the mud and earth and gravel, leaving my snoring husband and my steadily breathing children above, in that better place, until I was floating, once more, along the swiftly flowing current of the Fourth River.

When I rose up, gasping for air, and blinked the water from my eyes, I saw the familiar cavern lit by lanterns that lined the walls, orange fires burning behind smoked glass. And, not far downstream, his shadow stood along the water's edge, a lantern held out over the slug and tow of the current, waiting, as he was always waiting for me, there, in that place beneath the three rivers, there in the Fourth River's tunnel that leads to Smoke City.

It was time again, I understood, to attend to my obligations.

\* \* \*

History always exacts a price from those who have climbed out to live in the world above. There is never a way to fully outrun our beginnings. And here was mine, and he was mine here. I smiled, happy to see him again, the sharp bones of his face gold-leaved by the light of his lantern.

He put out his hand to fish me from the river, and pulled me up to stand beside him. "It is good to see you again, wife," he said, and I wrapped my arms around him.

"It is good to smell you again, husband," I said, my face pressed against his thick chest. They are large down here, the men of Smoke City. Their labor makes them into giants.

We walked along the Fourth River's edge, our hands linked between us, until we came to the mouth of the tunnel, where the city tipped into sight below, cupped as it is within the hands of a valley, strung together by the many bridges crossing the rivers that wind round its perimeter. The smoke obscured all but the dark mirrored glass of city towers, which gleamed by the light of the mill-fired skies down in the financial district, where the captains sit around long, polished tables throughout the hours and commit their business.

It did not take the fumes long to find me, the scent of the mills and the sweaty, grease-faced laborers, so that when my husband pulled me toward the carriage at the top of the Incline Passage, a moment passed in which my heart flickered like the flame climbing the wick of his lantern. I inhaled sharply, trying to catch my breath. Already what nostalgia for home I possessed had begun to evaporate as I began to remember, to piece together what I had worked so hard to obscure.

I hesitated at the door of the Incline carriage, looking back at the cavern opening, where the Fourth River spilled over the edge, down into the valley, but my husband placed two fingers on my chin and turned my face back up to his. "We must go now," he said, and I nodded at his eyes like chips of coal, his mustached upper lip, the sweat on his brow, as if he were working, even now, as in the mill, among the glowing rolls of steel.

The Incline rattled into gear, and soon we were creaking down the valley wall, rickety-click, the chains lowering us to the bottom, slowly, slowly. I watched out the window as the city grew close and the smoke began to thicken, holding a hand over my mouth and nose. An Incline car on the track opposite passed us, taking a man and a woman up to the Fourth River overlook. She, like me, peered out her window, a hand covering her mouth and nose as they ascended the tracks. We stared at each other, but it was she who first broke our gaze to look up at the opening to the cavern with great expectations, almost a panicked smile on her face, teeth gritted, willing herself upward. She was on her return journey, I could tell. I had worn that face myself. She had spent a long year here, and was glad to be leaving.

They are long here, the years in Smoke City, even though they are finished within the passing of a night.

At the bottom, my husband handed me down from the Incline car, then up again into our carriage, which was waiting by the curb, the horses nickering and snorting in the dark. Then off he sent us, jostling down the cobbled lane, with one flick of his wrist and a strong word.

Down many wide and narrow streets we rode, some mud, some brick, some stone, passing through the long rows of narrow workers' houses, all lined up and lean like soldiers, until we arrived at our own, in the Lost Neighborhood, down in Junction Hollow, where Eliza, the furnace, blocks the view of the river with her black bulk and her belching smoke. They are all female, always. They have unassuming names like Jeanette, Edith, Carrie. All night long, every night, they fill the sky with their fires.

Outside, on the front stoop of our narrow house, my children from the last time

were waiting, arms folded over their skinny chests or hanging limply at their sides. When I stepped down from the carriage onto the street, they ran down the stairs, their arms thrown wide, the word "Mother!" spilling from their eager mouths.

They had grown since I'd last seen them. They had grown so much that none of them had retained the names I'd given them at birth. Shauna, the youngest, had become Anis. Alexander was Shoeshine. Paul, the oldest, said to simply call him Ayu. "Quite lovely," I said to Anis. "Very good then," I told Shoeshine. And to Ayu, I said nothing, only nodded, showing the respect due an imagination that had turned so particularly into itself during my absence. He had a glint in his eyes. He reminded me of myself a little, willing to cast off anything we'd been told.

When we went through the door, the scent of boiled cabbage and potatoes filled the front room. They had cooked dinner for me, and quite proudly Anis and Shoeshine took hold of either elbow and led me to the scratched and corner-worn table, where we sat and shared their offering, not saying anything when our eyes met one another's. It was not from shame, our silence, but from an understanding that to express too much joy at my homecoming would be absurd. We knew that soon they would have no names at all, and I would never again see them.

We sipped our potato soup and finely chewed our noodles and cabbage.

Later, after the children had gone to bed, my husband led me up the creaking stairs to our own room, where we made love, fitting into one another on the gritty, soot-stained sheets. Old friends, always. Afterward, his arms wrapped around my sweaty stomach, holding me to him from behind, he said, "I die a little more each time you are away."

I did not reply immediately, but stared out the grimy window at the rooftops across the street. A crow had perched on the sill of the window opposite, casting about for the glint of something, anything, in the dark streets below. It cawed at me, as if it had noticed me staring, and ruffled its feathers. Finally, without turning to my husband, I said, "We all die," and closed my eyes to the night.

The days in the city of my birth are differentiated from the nights by small degrees of shade and color. The streetlamps continue burning during the day, since the sun cannot reach beyond the smoke that moves through the valley like a storm that will never abate. So it always appears to be night, and you can only tell it is day by the sound of shift whistles and church bells ringing the hours, announcing when it is time to return to work or to kneel and pray.

No growing things grew in Smoke City, due to the lack of sunlight. On no stoops or windowsills did a fern or a flower add their shapes and colors to the square and rectangular stone backdrops of the workers' houses. Only fine dusty coatings of soot, in which children drew pictures with the tips of their fingers, and upon which adults would occasionally scrawl strange messages:

*Do Not Believe Anything They Tell You.*

*Your Rewards Await You In Heaven.*

*It Is Better That Others Possess What I Need But Do Not Understand.*

I walked my children down the road, past these cryptic depictions of stick men and women on the sides of houses and words whose meanings I could not fathom, until we came to the gates of the furnace Eliza, whose stacks sent thick plumes of smoke into the air. There, holding the hands of my two youngest, I knelt down in the street to meet their faces. "You must do what you are told," I instructed them, my heart squeezing even as I said the words. "You must work very hard, and never be of trouble to anyone, understand?"

The little ones, Anis and Shoeshine, nodded. They had all been prepared for this day over the short years of their lives. But Ayu, my oldest, narrowed his eyes to a

squint and folded his arms over his chest, as if he understood more than I was saying. Those eyes were mine looking back at me, calling me a liar. "Do you understand, Ayu?" I asked him directly, to stop him from making that look. When he refused to answer, I asked, "Paul, do you understand me?" and he looked down at his feet, the head of a flower wilting.

I stood again, took up their small hands again, and led them to Eliza's gates, the top of which was decorated with a flourish of coiled barbed wire. A small, square window in the door opened as we stood waiting, and a man's eye looked out at us. "Are they ready?" he said.

I nodded.

The window snapped shut, then the gate doors began to separate, widening as they opened. Inside, we could see many people working, sparks flying, carts of coal going back and forth, the rumble of the mill distorting the voices of the workers. The man who had opened the gate window came from around the corner to greet us. He was small, stocky, with oily skin and a round face. He smiled, but I could not manage to be anything but straight-faced and stoic. He held his hands out to the little ones, who went to him, giving him their hands as they'd been instructed, and my heart filled my mouth, suffocating me, so that I fell to my knees and buried my face in my hands.

"Stupid cow," the gateman said, and as soon as I took my hands away to look up, I saw Ayu running away, his feet kicking up dust behind him. "See what you've done?" *Do not look back, I told Ayu with my mind, hoping he could somehow hear me. Do not look back or you will be detained here forever.*

Then the gates shut with a metallic bang, and my small ones were gone from me, gone to Eliza.

The first month of my year in the city of my birth passed slowly, painfully, like the after-effects of a night of drunkenness. For a while I had wondered if Ayu would return to the house at some point, to gather what few possessions he had made or acquired over his short lifetime, but he stayed away, smartly. My husband would have only taken him back to Eliza if he found him. That is the way, what is proper, and my husband here was nothing if not proper.

We made love every night, after he returned from the mill, his arms heavy around my waist, around my shoulders. But something had occurred on the day I'd given up the last ones: my womb had withered, and now refused to take our love and make something from its materials.

Still, we tried. Or I should say, my husband tried. Perhaps that was the reason for my body's reluctance. Whenever his breath fell against my neck, or his mouth on my breasts, I would look out the window and see Eliza's fires scouring the sky across the mountaintops, and what children we may have made, the idea of them, would burn to cinders.

"You do not love me anymore," my husband said one night, in my second month in the city; and though I wanted to, badly, I could not deny this.

I tried to explain. "It is not you, it is not me, it is this place," I told him. "Why don't you come with me, why don't we leave here together?"

"You forget so easily," my husband said, looking down into his mug of cold coffee.

"What?" I said. "What do I forget?"

"You have people there, in the place you would take me."

I looked down into my own mug and did not nod.

"It is what allows you to forget me, to forget our children, our life," said my husband.

"What is?" I asked, looking up again. Rarely did my husband tell me things about myself.

"Your bad memory," said my husband. "It is your blessing."

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If my memory were truly as bad as my husband thought, I would not have been returned to the city of my birth. He was incorrect in his judgment. What he should have said was, *Your memory is too strong to accomplish what you desire*, for I would not have been able to dismiss that. It is true, I wanted nothing more than to eradicate, to be born into a new world without the shackles of longing, and the guilt that embitters longing fulfilled.

But he had said his truth, flawed as it was, and because he had spoken this truth we could no longer look at each other without it hovering between us, a ghost of every child we had ever had together, every child I had taken, as a proper wife and mother, to the gates. They stared at me for him, and I would turn away to cook, clean, mend, to keep the walls of the house together.

Another month passed in this way, and then another. I washed my husband's clothes each day in a tub of scalding water. The skin on my hands began to redden, then to peel away. I began to avoid mirrors. My hair had gone lank and hung about my face like coils of old rope, no matter how I tried to arrange it. I could no longer see my own pupils, for there was no white left in the corners. My eyes had turned dark with coal dust and smoke.

One day a knock at the front door pulled me away from the dinner I was making for my husband's return from another sixteen-hour shift. When I opened the door, a man from the mill, a manager I vaguely recognized, was standing on my stoop. He held a hat against his protruding stomach, as if he had taken it off to recite a pledge or a piece of poetry. "Excuse me," he said, "for interrupting your day. But I come with sad news."

Before he could finish, I knew what he would say. Few reasons exist for a mill manager to visit a worker's wife.

"Your husband," he said, and I could not hear the rest of his words, only saw the images they carried within them: my husband, a slab of meat on the floor of the mill, burned by Eliza. My husband, a slab of meat on the floor of the mill, dragged away to be replaced by another body, another man, so that Eliza could continue her labors.

"You will need time to rest, of course," the manager said. "I'm sure it is quite a shock, but these things happen."

I nodded, dumbly, and stood there, waiting for something.

"We will be in touch, of course," said the manager as he stepped off my stoop back onto the cobbled street.

If I would have had any sense left in me, I would have done what Ayu had done, I would have run away as fast as possible, I would have done what I had done before, a long time ago, when I'd left the first time, with my mother's hand raised in the air above her cloud of white hair, waving behind me.

Instead, I sank down into my husband's chair in the front room and wept. For him, for our children, wept selfishly for myself. What would I do without him? I could feel him all around me, his big body having pressed its shape into the armchair, holding me in its embrace.

Within a week, a mass of suitors arranged themselves in a queue outside my door. They knocked. I answered. One was always waiting to speak to me, big and hulking like my husband had been, a little younger in some cases, a little older in others. Used up men and men in the process of being used. They wanted me to cook, clean, and make love to them. I turned them away, all of them. "No thank you," I said to each knock, glancing over their shoulders to see if the line of suitors had shortened. It stretched down the street and around the corner, no matter how many men I turned away.

There was a shortage of women, one of the suitors finally informed me, trying to make his case as a rational man, to explain himself as suitable for someone like me. There were many men in need of a good wife.

"I am not a good wife," I told him. "You must go to another house of mourning," I told him. "You must find a different wife."

The suitors disappeared then. One by one they began to walk away from the queue they had formed, and for a while my front stoop was empty. I went back to sitting in my husband's chair, grieving.

My memory was bad, he had told me, but he was wrong. My memory kept him walking the halls and the staircase, my memory refused to let go of him completely, as it had refused to let go each time I left. *I die a little more each time you are away*, he had said the first night of my return to the city. Now he was dead, I thought, there would be no more dying. Upon realizing this, I stood up from his chair.

Before I could take a step in any direction of my own choosing, though, a knock arrived at the front door, pulling me toward it. How quickly we resume routine, how quickly we do what is expected: a child cries out, we run to it; something falls in another room, we turn corners to see what has fallen; a knock lands upon a door, we answer.

Outside stood three men, all in dark suits with the gold chains of watches drooping from their pockets. They wore top hats, and long waxed mustaches. They wore round spectacles in thin wire frames. I recognized them for what they were immediately: captains of industry. But what could they be doing here, I wondered, on the front stoop of a widow at a forgettable address in the Lost Neighborhood, down in Junction Hollow?

"Forgive us for intruding," they said. "We do not mean to startle you."

They introduced themselves, each one tipping his hat as he delivered his name: A.W., H.C., R.B. All captains' names are initials. It is their badge of honor.

"We understand," they said, "that you have recently lost your husband."

I nodded, slow and stupid.

"And we understand that you have turned away all of the many suitors who have come requesting your hand in marriage," they continued.

I nodded again.

"We are here to inquire as to your plans, madame, for the future," they said, and took their pocket watches out to check the time, to see if the future had arrived yet. "Do you mean to marry again?" they asked. "Do you plan to provide us with more children?"

I shook my head this time, and opened my mouth to ask the purpose of their visit. But before I could form one word, they tapped at my chest with their white-gloved hands.

"Now, now," they said, slipping their watches back into their pockets. "No need for any of that."

Then they took hold of my arms and pushed me back into my house, closing the door behind them.

Within the passing of a night I became sick with their children; within a week, the front of my housedress began to tighten; and within a month, I gave birth: three in all. One by one, their children ripped away from me and grew to the size of the children I had walked to the gates of Eliza.

I did not need to feed them. They grew from the nourishment of my tears and rages. They knew how to walk and talk instinctively, and began to make bargains with one another, trading clothes and toys and whole tracts of land.

Soon their fathers returned to claim them. "Thank you very much," said the cap-

tains, as they presented each child with a pocket watch, a pair of white gloves, a top hat. Then they looked at me. "In return for your troubles, we have built you a library."

They swept their arms in wide arcs to the opposite side of the street. Where once a row of houses stood shoulder to shoulder, now a three-story library parked its bulk along the sidewalk. "Where are my neighbors?" I asked. "Where are my friends?"

"We have moved them to another part of the city," said the captains. "Do not worry. We are in the midst of building them their own library at this very moment. We do not take, you see, without giving back."

Then they clapped their hands and curled their index fingers over and over, motioning for their top-hatted, white-gloved children to follow, checking the time on their new pocket watches as they walked toward the financial district.

A dark rumor soon began to circulate throughout the back rooms in pubs and in the common rooms of the libraries of Smoke City. The captains' children were growing faster than their fathers could manage, it was said. The captains themselves, it was said, were having difficulties with their wives, who remained in their stone mansions on top of the mountains ringing the city, above the strata of smoke. One wife had committed suicide and another had snuck out of her mansion in the middle of the night, grown wings, and flown across the ocean to her home country, where her captain had found her many years ago sitting by a river, strumming a stringed instrument and singing a ballad of lost love. Those of us who lived below their homes above the point where the wind blew smoke away from the captains' houses had never seen these women, but we knew they were aching with beauty.

I could see it all now, what lay behind that terrible evening, and the plans the captains' children had been making as they'd left with their fathers, opening the backs of their pocket watches to examine the gears clicking inside, taking them out to hold up to the non-existent light.

Indeed, the future spread out before me, a horizon appearing where the captains' sons were building machines out of the gears of their pocket watches, and more men lumbered away from the mills every day to sit on porches and frustrate their wives who did not know how to take care of them while they were in their presence.

A future will always reveal itself, even in places like Smoke City.

But smoke nor soot nor the teeth of gears as they turned what arms once turned, as they ground time to chaff and splinters, could not provide the future I desired. I had seen something else—a long time ago, it seemed now, or a long time to come—and though it came with the price of unshakable memory, I began the journey that would return me to it.

Through the streets I trudged to the Incline platform, where I waited for my car wearing nothing but my worn-out housedress, my old shoes covered in mud and the stinking feces of horses. No one looked at me. I was not unnatural.

When the car arrived, I climbed in. And when the car began to lift, rickety-click, I breathed a small sigh. This time, though, as I turned to peer out the back window, my mother was not there, waving her hand in the air. Only the city. Only the city and its rooftops spread out behind me. This time, I was leaving without the cobwebs of the past clinging to me.

On the way up, a car went by in the opposite direction, carrying a woman with her man inside it. I stared at her for a moment, staring at me through her window, a frightened look on her face, before I broke our gaze to look up at the mouth of the Fourth River's cavern and the water spilling from it.

When the car reached the top, I exited to wander through the lantern-lit cavern,

the river beside me, until the walls were bare and no lanterns lit the way any longer, and the roar of the river was in my ears and the dark of the cave filled my eyes.

At some point, I felt the chill of rising water surround me. It trickled over my toes at first, then lifted me off my feet. I began to swim upward, pulling my arms through the current, kicking my legs furiously. Up and up and up I swam, until I opened my eyes to sunlight, blue skies that hurt to look at, yellow bridges, vast hills of green, and somewhere on the other side of this city my husband in this place would be waking up to find I had left him in the middle of the night again. He would wake the children next, the children I would never give over, and together they would walk to the place where I found myself surfacing. They have come across me here before. My husband will take my hand, say, "Early riser," and I would bring his hand to my lips to kiss it.

I gasped, taking the blue air into my lungs, the light into my eyes. The city, the city of my refuge, spread out before me, the rivers on either side of me spangled with light, a fountain spraying into the air, the towers of downtown gleaming. The smoke of that other city was gone now, the fires in that other sky were nowhere on this horizon. The smoke and the fires were in some other world, and I found that I could only weep now, selfishly grateful that it was no longer mine. ○

## GARDEN FAIRIES



There are fairies in my garden,  
not the bottom but near the front end,  
gnawing on the long stems of roses,  
their teeth sharper than the thorns.

Do not let them know you see them  
or they will disappear into a swollen petal

or beat their wings in time  
to the hummingbird's tune  
till you cannot tell one from the other.

Be careful you do not smell of flowers,  
or honey, or possibly of fruit.  
Leave off perfumes when you go there.

Shampoos must be chosen with care:  
mint will do, or pine tar.

If they smell something sweet,  
they will sink their teeth  
into your flesh, and you will become  
a mooncalf, a ninnywit, a scare-bird  
howling at the stars.

My uncle was taken that way,  
here in the garden, a year ago Friday.  
I would not want it happening to you.

—Jane Yolen

Tom Purdom tells us “the most earthshaking events in my recent life were the first season of our new pro soccer team, the Philadelphia Union, and my conversion to reading books on Barnes & Noble’s Nook. The soccer team did okay and I found the difference between print and an e-reader is about as significant, emotionally, as the difference between hardcover and paperback.” Tom once again puts his knowledge of military tactics and human scheming together to help save humanity from the dangerous consequences of . . .

# A RESPONSE FROM EST17

Tom Purdom

**T**he Betzino-Resdell Exploration Community received its first message from Trans Cultural 5.23 seconds after it settled into orbit around the planet designated Extra-Solar EST17.

“I am the official representative of the Trans-Cultural Institute for Multi-Disciplinary and Extra-Disciplinary Interstellar Exploration and Study,” Trans Cultural radioed. “I represent a consortium of seventy-three political entities and two hundred and seventy-three academic, research, and cultural institutions located in every region of the Earth. You are hereby requested to refrain from direct contact with the surface of Extra-Solar Terranoid EST17. My own contact devices have already initiated exploration of the planet. You will be granted access to my findings.”

The eighteen programs included in the Betzino-Resdell Community were called “alters”—as in “alter-ego” or “alternate personality”—but they were not self-aware. They were merely complicated, incredibly dense arrangements of circuits and switches, like every machine intelligence the human species had ever created. But they had been sponsored by seven different sets of shareholders and they had been shaped by the goals and personalities of their sponsors. They spent the first 7.62 seconds after their arrival testing the three copies of each program stored in their files so they could determine which copies had survived the journey in the best shape and should be activated. Then they turned their attention to the message from Trans Cultural.

Betzino and Resdell had been the primary sponsors of the expedition. Their electronic simulations controlled sixty of the ninety-five votes distributed among the community. Their vote to reject the demand settled the matter. But the other five concurred. The only no vote came from the group of alters tasked to study non-human sexuality. One member of that group cast one vote each way.

22.48 seconds after its arrival, the Betzino-Resdell Exploration Community initiated its exploration routine. The programs housed in Trans Cultural noted that Betzino-Resdell had failed to comply with their orders. Trans Cultural activated its dominance routine and the routine initiated activity. The first human artifacts to reach Extra Solar Terranoid EST17 entered the first stages of the social phenomenon their creators called microwar.

The Betzino-Resdell Exploration Community had been crammed into a container a little larger than a soccer ball. A microwave beam mounted on the Moon had pushed it out of the solar system. Trans Cultural left the Solar System five years later, but it had wealthier backers who could finance a bigger boost applied to a bigger sail. It covered the distance in 1,893,912 hours—a little over two hundred and sixteen Earth years—and reached EST17 six years before Betzino-Resdell. It had already established a base on the planet and begun exploration.

Betzino-Resdell peered at the surface through lenses that were half the size of a human eye, but it had been equipped with state of the art enhancement programs. EST17 was an inhabited planet. Its residents seemed to be concentrated in 236 well-defined cities. The rest of the planet looked like an undisturbed panorama of natural landscapes, distributed over four major landmasses.

The original human version of the Resdell alter was an astronomer who had been interested in the search for extra-terrestrial life ever since he had watched his first documentary when he had been six years old. Anthony Resdell was a pleasant, likeable guy whose best-known professional achievement was a popular video series that had made him moderately rich. His alter immediately noted that EST17 seemed to violate a dictum laid down by an aristocratic twentieth century space visionary. Any extra-terrestrial civilizations the human race encountered would be thousands of years ahead of us or millennia behind, Sir Arthur had opined. The odds they would be anywhere near us were so small we could assume the advanced civilizations would think we were savages.

The cities Betzino-Resdell could observe looked remarkably like the better-run cities on Earth. The satellites that ringed the planet resembled the satellites that orbited Earth. Samples of their electronic emissions recorded a similar range of frequencies and intensities.

The Betzino alter rifled through all the speculations on technological development stored in the library and distributed them to its colleagues—a process that ate up 13.3 seconds. The catalog contained several thousand entries—most of them extracted from works of fiction—but it could be grouped into a manageable list of categories:

- Technologies so advanced less enlightened space explorers couldn't detect them.
- Hedonism.
- Deliberate limitation.
- A planet that lacked a key resource.
- Anti-technology cultural biases.
- And so on. . . .

"We must match each piece of new data with each of those possibilities," Resdell said. "We have encountered a significant anomaly."

Betzino concurred. Two members of the community disagreed. The proposal became operational.

Trans Cultural seemed to be concentrating on a site on the largest southern continent, in a heavily wooded area fifty kilometers from a large coastal city. Betzino-Resdell selected a site on a northern continent, in a mountainous area near a city located on

the western shore of a long lake. Three tiny needles drifted out of a hatch and began a slow descent through the planet's thick atmosphere. Two needles made it to the ground. Machines that could have been mistaken for viruses oozed through the soil and collected useful atoms. Little viruses became bigger viruses, larger machines began to sprout appendages, and the routines stored in the needles proceeded through the first stages of the process that had spread human structures through the Solar System.

It was a long, slow business. Three local years after Arrival, the largest active machines resembled hyper-mobile insects. Semi-organic flying creatures took to the air in year twelve. In year eighteen, a slab of rock became a functioning antenna and the Betzino-Resdell orbiter established communications with its ground base.

In year twenty-two, the first fully equipped airborne exploration devices initiated a systematic reconnaissance of the territory within one hundred kilometers of the base.

In year twenty-nine, a long range, semi-organic airborne device encountered a long range, semi-organic airborne device controlled by Trans Cultural. The Trans Cultural device attempted to capture the Betzino-Resdell device intact and the Betzino-Resdell device responded, after a brief chase, by erasing all the information in its memory cells, including the location of the Betzino-Resdell base. The microwar had entered the skirmish stage.

In year thirty-six, a native flying creature that resembled a feathered terrestrial toad approached a Betzino-Resdell device that resembled a small flying predator common in the area around the base. The airborne toad settled on a branch overlooking the eastern shore of the lake and turned its head toward the faux predator.

"I would like to talk to you," the toad said in perfectly enunciated twenty-second century Italian. "This is an unofficial, private contact. It would be best if you kept your outward reactions to a minimum."

The Appointee received her first briefing three days after the Integrators roused her from dormancy. They had roused her nineteen years before she was supposed to begin her next active period, but she had suppressed her curiosity and concentrated on the sensual pleasures recommended for the first days after activation. She and her husband always enjoyed the heightened sexual arousal that followed a fifty-year slumber. Normally they would have stretched it over several more days.

The name posted on the hatch of her dormancy unit was Varosa Uman Deun Mal-invo . . . Her husband's officially recognized appellation was Budsi Hisalito Sudili Hadbitad . . . The ellipses referred to the hundreds of names they had added to their own—the names of all the known ancestors who had perished before the Abolition of Death. He called her Varo. She called him Budsi in public, Siti in private.

They were both bipeds with the same general anatomical layout as an unmodified human, with blocky, heavily boned bodies that had been shaped by the higher gravity of their native world. Their most distinctive features, to human eyes, would have been their massive hands and the mat of soft, intricately colored feathers that crowned their heads and surrounded their faces. As Betzino-Resdell had already noted, the accidents of evolution had favored feathers over fur on EST17.

The briefing took place in a secure underground room equipped with a viewing stage that was bigger than most apartments. A direct, real-time image of the current First Principal Overseer appeared on the stage while Varosa Uman was still settling into a viewing chair.

"You've been aroused ahead of schedule because we have a visitation," the First Principal said. "The Integrators responded to the latest development by advising us they want you to oversee our response. You will be replacing Mansita Jano, who has been the Situation Overseer since the first detection. He's conducted a flawless response, in my opinion. You won't find a better guide."

A male with bright yellow facial feathers materialized beside the First Principal. Varosa Uman ordered a quick scan on her personal information system and confirmed that she was replacing one of the twenty leading experts on the history of visitations—a scholar with significant practical experience. Mansita Jano Santisi Jinmano . . . had served on the committee that had worked on the last visitation. He had been a scholar-observer during the visitation twelve hundred years before that.

"It will be an honor to work with you, Mansita Jano."

She could have said more. Mansita Jano's expertise dwarfed her own knowledge of visitations. But the Integrators had picked her. She couldn't let him think he could dominate her thinking.

He couldn't be happy with the change. He knew he was better qualified. She would be harrying Siti with exasperated tirades if the Integrators had done something like that to her. But Mansita Jano was looking at her with polite interest, as if their relative positions had no emotional significance. And she would have donned the same mask, if their positions had been reversed.

A panoramic spacescape replaced the two figures. A line traced the path of an incoming visitation device—a standard minimum-mass object attached to a standard oversize light sail. It was a typical visitation rig and it behaved in a typical fashion. It spent twelve years slowing down and settling into its permanent orbit. It launched a subsidiary device at the third moon of the fourth planet and the subsidiary started working on an installation that would probably develop into a communications relay, in the same way the last two visitations had established relays on the same moon. It released three microweight orbit-to-surface devices (the last visitation had released two) and the survivors advanced to the next step in a typical visitation program.

All over the galaxy intelligent species reached a certain level and developed similar interstellar technologies. Each species thought it had reached a pinnacle. Each species saw its achievements as a triumph of intelligence and heroic effort.

The story became more interesting when the second visitation entered the system. Varosa Uman watched the two devices set up independent bases. She observed the first attack. Maps noted the locations of other incidents. The first visitor seemed to be the aggressor in every engagement.

The two orbiters definitely came from the same source. Their species had obviously generated at least two social entities that could launch interstellar probes. That happened now and then—*everything* had happened now and then—but this was the first time Varosa Uman's species had dealt with a divided visitation. Was that why the Integrators had roused her?

It was a logical thought, but she knew it was irrelevant as soon as she saw the encounter between the second visitor and a device that had obviously been created by a member of her own species.

"The unauthorized contacts have been initiated by an Adventurer with an all too familiar name," the First Principal said. "Revutev Mavarka Verenka Turetva . . . Mansita Jano was preparing to take action when the Integrators advised us they were putting you in charge of our response to the visitation."

"I have received a cease-operations command from my organic predecessor," the Resdell alter said. "This will be my last message. Do not anticipate a revival."

The Betzino alter mimicked the thought processes of a woman who possessed a formidable intellect. Edna Betzino had been a theoretical physicist, a psychiatrist, and an investigatory sociologist specializing in military and semi-military organizations. In her spare time, she had become a widely respected cellist who was a devoted student of Bach and his twenty-second century successors. She had launched her

own interstellar probe because she had never developed an institutional affiliation that would offer her proper backing.

The Betzino alter rifled through its databanks—as Betzino herself would have—and determined that Anthony Resdell lived in a governmental unit that had become a “single-leader state.” Messages from Earth had to cross eighteen light years, so the information in the databanks was, of course, eighteen earthyears out of date. The cease-operations command would remain in effect until the Resdell alter received a countermand from Anthony Resdell.

The ninety-five votes had now been reduced to sixty-five. Their creators had neglected to include a routine that adjusted the percentages, so Betzino still controlled thirty votes. She would need the support of one minor member every time the community made a decision.

Three of the minor members wanted to continue discussions with the inhabitant who had made contact. Two objected, on the grounds the inhabitant was obviously an unofficial private individual.

“We have no information regarding his relations with their political entities,” the spokesman for the sex research community argued. “He could bias them against us when we try to make a proper contact.”

Their mobile device had exchanged language programs with the inhabitant’s contact device. The data indicated the inhabitant’s primary language had a structure and vocabulary that resembled the structure and vocabulary of the languages technologically advanced human societies had developed.

Betzino voted to maintain the contact. Switches tripped in response and the contact and language programs remained active.

There was a standard response to visitations. It was called the Message. Varosa Uman’s species had transmitted it twice and received it once.

Mansita Jano had initiated Message preparation as soon as he had been given responsibility for the visitation. He would have initiated contact with one of the visitors and proceeded to the final stages if Revutev Mavarka hadn’t started “bungling around.”

Mansita Jano believed Revutev Mavarka should be arrested before he could cause any more trouble. “We have documentary evidence Revutev Mavarka has committed a serious crime,” Mansita Jano said. “I think we can also assume the first visitor has a higher status than the visitor he’s been attempting to charm. The first visitor rebuffed his overtures. We have translated a communication in which it ordered the second visitor to cease operations.”

There was nothing sinister about the Message. It was, in fact, the greatest gift an intelligent species could receive. It contained all the knowledge twenty-three technological civilizations had accumulated, translated into the major languages employed by the recipient. With the information contained in the Message, any species that had developed interstellar probes could cure all its diseases, quadruple its intelligence, bestow millennia of life on all its members, reshape the life forms on its planet, tap energy sources that would maintain its civilization until the end of the universe, and generally treat itself to the kind of society it had been dreaming about since it first decided it didn’t have to endure all the death and suffering the universe inflicted on it.

And that was the problem. No society could absorb that much change in one gulp. Varosa Uman’s species had endured a millennium of chaos after it had received its version of the Message.

It was an elegant defense. The Message satisfied the consciences of the species who employed it and it permanently eliminated the threat posed by visitors who might have hostile intentions. Interstellar war might seem improbable, but it wasn’t impossible. A small probe could slip into a planetary system unannounced, establish

a base on an obscure body, and construct equipment that could launch a flotilla of genocidal rocks at an unsuspecting world.

Varosa Uman's people had never sent another visitor to the stars. As far as they could tell, all the species that had received the Message had settled into the same quiet isolation—if they survived their own version of the Great Turbulence.

"The Message can be considered a kind of conditioning," a post-Turbulence committee had concluded. "The chaos it creates implants a permanent aversion to interstellar contact."

Revutev Mavarka was an Adventurer—a member of a minority group that constituted approximately twelve percent of the population. Varosa Uman's species had emerged from the Turbulence by forcing far-reaching modifications on the neurochemical reactions that shaped their emotional responses. They had included a controlled number of thrill-seekers and novelty chasers in their population mix because they had understood that a world populated by tranquil, relentlessly socialized Serenes had relinquished some of its capacity to adapt. No society could foresee all the twists and traps the future could hold.

Most Adventurers satisfied their special emotional needs with physical challenges and sexual escapades. Revutev Mavarka seemed to be captivated by less benign outlets. His fiftieth awake had been marked by his attempt to disrupt the weather program that controlled the rainfall over the Fashlev mountain range. The First Principal Overseer had added twelve years to his next dormancy period and the Integrators had approved the penalty.

In his seventy-third awake, Revutev Mavarka had designed a small, hyperactive carnivore that had transferred a toxin through the food chain and transformed the habitués of a staid island resort into a population of temporary risk addicts. In his eighty-first, he had decided his happiness depended upon the companionship of a prominent fashion despot and kidnapped her after she had won a legal restraint on his attentions. The poisoning had added twenty-two years to his next dormancy, the kidnapping twenty-eight.

Varosa Uman and her husband liked cool winds and rugged landscapes. They liked to sit on high balconies, hands touching, and watch winged creatures circle over gray northern seas.

"It's Revutev Mavarka," Varosa Uman said. "He's made an unauthorized contact with a visitation."

"And the Integrators think you can give them some special insight?"

"They've placed me in charge of the entire response. I'm replacing Mansita Jano."

Siti called up Mansita Jano's data and scanned through it. "He's a specialist," Siti said. "It's a big responsibility, but I think I agree with the Integrators."

"You may belong to a very small minority. They gave me a scrupulously polite briefing."

"They don't know you quite as well as I do."

"Mansita Jano was getting ready to arrest Revutev Mavarka. And offer the message."

"And you think the situation is a bit more complicated . . ."

"There are two visitors. One of them is acting like it represents a planetary authority. The other one—the visitor Revutev Mavarka contacted—looks like it may have more in common with him. I have to see how much support Revutev Mavarka has. I can't ignore that. You have to think about their emotional reactions when you're dealing with the Adventurer community. I have to weigh their feelings and I have to think about the responses we could provoke in the visitors—both visitors. We aren't the first people to confront two visitors but it still increases the complexities—the unknowns."

"And Revutev Mavarka has piled more complexities on top of that. And the Integrators understandably decided we'd be better off with someone like you pondering the conflicts."

The contact had told the Betzino-Resdell community they should call him Donald. So far they had mostly traded language programs. They could exchange comments on the weather in three hundred and seven different languages.

The alters that were interested in non-human sexuality lobbied for permission to swap data on sexual practices. There were six alters in the group, and they represented the six leading scholars associated with the North Pacific Center for the Analysis of Multi-Gender Sexuality. The exploration units they controlled had observed the activities of eight local life forms. All eight seemed to have developed the same unimaginative two-sex pattern life had evolved on Earth. Their forays into the cities had given them a general picture of the inhabitants' physiology, but it had left them with a number of unresolved issues.

Topic: Does your species consist of two sexes?

Betzino-Resdell: Yes.

Donald: Yes.

Topic: Are there any obvious physical differences between the sexes?

BR: Yes.

Donald: Yes.

Topic: What are they?

BR: Our males are larger, bigger boned on average. Generally more muscular.

Donald: Males more colorful, more varied facial feathers.

Topic: Do you form permanent mating bonds?

BR: Yes.

Donald: Yes.

Topic: Do any members of your species engage in other patterns?

BR: Yes.

Donald: Yes.

Topic: How common are these other patterns?

BR: In many societies, very high percentages engage in other patterns.

Donald: Why do you wish to know?

The visitation committee was receiving a full recording of every exchange between Revutev Mavarka and the visitation device that called itself Betzino-Resdell. Revutev Mavarka was, of course, fully aware that he was being observed. So far he had avoided any exchanges that could produce accusations he had transmitted potentially dangerous information.

"It must be frustrating," Varosa Uman said. "He must have a million subjects he'd like to discuss."

"We just need one slip," Mansita Jano said. "Give us one slip and he'll be lucky if fifty members of his own class stand by him."

"And the visitor will have the information contained in the slip. . . ."

Mansita Jano's facial feathers stirred—an ancient response that made his face look bigger and more threatening. "Then why not silence him before he does it, Overseer? Do you really think he can keep this up indefinitely without saying something catastrophic?"

"I've been thinking a dangerous thought," Varosa Uman said.

"I'm not surprised," Siti said.

"Every intelligent species that has sent visitors to an inhabited world has appar-

ently lived through the same horrible experience we did. Some of them may not have survived it. If our experience is typical, everybody who receives the Message responds in the same way when they receive a visitation after they've gone through their version of the Turbulence. The Message is a great teacher. It teaches us that contact with other civilizations is a dangerous disruption."

Two large winged predators were swooping over the water just below the level of their balcony. The dark red plumage on their wings created a satisfying contrast with the gray of the sea and the sky.

"I'm thinking it might be useful if someone looked at an alternative response," Varosa Uman said.

Siti ran his fingers across the back of her hand. They had been married for eighty-two complete cycles—twenty-four hundred years of full consciousness. He knew when to speak and when to mutely remind her he was there.

"Suppose someone tried a different role," Varosa Uman said. "Suppose we offered to guide these visitors through all the adaptations they're going to confront. Step by step."

"As an older, more experienced species."

"Which we are. In this area, at least."

"We would have to maintain contact," Siti said. "They would be influencing us, too."

"And threatening us with more turbulence. I'd be creating a disruption the moment I mentioned the idea to Mansita Jano."

"Have you mentioned your intellectual deviation to the Integrators?"

"They gave me one of their standard routines. They pointed out the dangers, I asked them for a decision, and they told me they were only machines, I'm the Situation Overseer."

"And they picked you because their routines balanced all the relevant factors—see attached list—and decided you were the best available candidate."

"I think it's pretty obvious I got the job because I'm more sympathetic to the Adventurer viewpoint than most of the candidates who had the minimum expertise they were looking for."

"You're certainly more sympathetic than Mansita Jano. As I remember it, your major response to Revutev Mavarka's last misadventure was a daily outburst of highly visible amusement."

Siti had been convinced he wanted to establish a permanent bond before they had finished their first active period together. She had resisted the idea until they were halfway through their next awake, but she had known she would form a bond with someone sooner or later. They were both people with a fundamental tendency to drift into permanent bonds and they had reinforced that tendency, soon after they made the commitment, with a personality adjustment that eliminated disruptive urges.

Siti found Revutev Mavarka almost incomprehensible. A man who kidnapped a woman just to satisfy a transient desire? And created a turmoil that affected hundreds of people?

*Twenty years from now she won't mean a thing to him*, Siti had said. *And he knows it.*

"He's impulsive," Varosa Uman said. "I can't let myself forget he's impulsive. Unpredictably."

Trans Cultural had asked all the required questions and looked at all the proffered bona fides. The emissary called Varosa Uman Deun Malinvo . . . satisfied all the criteria that indicated said emissary represented a legitimate governmental authority.

"Is it correct to assume you represent the dominant governmental unit on your planet?" Trans Cultural asked.

"I represent the only governmental unit on my planet."

Varosa Uman had established a direct link with the base Trans Cultural had created in the Gildeen Wilderness. She had clothed herself in the feather and platinum finery high officials had worn at the height of the Third TaraTin Empire and she was transmitting a full, detailed image. Trans Cultural was still limiting itself to voice-only.

"Thank you for offering that information," Trans Cultural said.

"Are you supposed to limit your contacts to governmental representatives?"

"I am authorized to initiate conversations with any entity as representative as the consortium I represent."

"Can you give us any information on the other visitor currently operating on our world?"

"The Betzino-Resdell Exploration Community primarily represents two private individuals. The rest of its membership comprises two other individuals and three minor organizations."

"Can you give me any information on its members?"

"I'm afraid I'm not authorized to dispense that information at present."

"The presence of another visitor from your society seems to indicate you do not have a single entity that can speak for your entire civilization. Is that correct?"

"I represent the dominant consensus on our world. My consortium represents all the major political, intellectual, and cultural organizations on our world. I am authorized to furnish a complete list on request."

Betzino-Resdell had created an antenna by shaping a large rock slab into a shallow dish and covering it with a thin metal veneer. The orbiter passed over the antenna once every 75.6 minutes and exchanged transmissions.

"You should create an alternate transmission route," Revutev Mavarka said. "I've been observing your skirmishes with the other visitor. You should be prepared to continue communications with your orbiter if they manage to invade your base and destroy your antenna."

"Do you think that's a significant possibility?"

"I believe you should be prepared. That's my best advice."

"He's preparing a betrayal," Mansita Jano said. "He's telling us he's prepared to send them information about the Message if we attempt to arrest him."

Varosa Uman reset the recording and watched it again. She received recordings of every interchange between Revutev Mavarka and the second visitor, but Mansita Jano had brought this to her attention as soon as it had been intercepted.

Mansita Jano had raised the possibility of a "warning message" in their first meetings. The Message itself contained some hints that it had thrown whole civilizations into turmoil, but most of the evidence had been edited out of the historical sections. The history of their own species painted an accurate picture up to their receipt of the Message.

The humans would never hear of the millions who had died so the survivors could live through a limitless series of active and dormant periods. They would learn the cost when they counted their own dead.

But what would happen if their visitors received a message warning them of the dangers? Would it have any effect? Would they ignore it and stumble into the same wilderness their predecessors had entered?

For Mansita Jano, the mere possibility Revutev Mavarka might send such a message proved they should stop "chattering" and defend themselves.

"We have no idea what such a warning message might do," Mansita Jano said. "Its

very existence would create an unpredictable situation that could generate endless debate—endless *turbulence!*—within our own society. By now the humans have received the first messages informing them of our existence. By now, every little group like these Betzino-Resdell adventurers could have launched a visitor in our direction. How will we treat them when we know they're emissaries from a society that has been warned?"

"I started working on that issue as soon as I finished viewing the recording," Varosa Uman said. "I advised the Integrators I want to form a study committee and they've given me the names of ten candidates."

"And when they've finished their studies, they'll give you the only conclusion anyone can give you. We'll have fifty visitors orbiting the planet and we'll still be staring at the sky arguing about a list loaded with bad choices."

The Integrators never used a visual representation when they communicated with their creators. They were machines. You must never forget they were only machines. Varosa Uman usually turned toward her biggest window and looked out at the sea when she talked to them.

"I think you chose me because of my position on the Adventurer personality scale," Varosa Uman said. "You felt I would understand an Adventurer better than someone with a personality closer to the mean. Is that a reasonable speculation?"

"You were chosen according to the established criteria for your assignment."

"And I can't look at the criteria because you've blocked access."

"That is one of the rules in the procedure for overseeing visitations. Access to that information is blocked until the visitation crisis has been resolved."

"Are you obeying the original rules? Or have they been modified here and there over the last three thousand years?"

"There have been no modifications."

"So why can't I just talk to someone who remembers what the original rules were?"

"You are advised not to do that. We would have to replace you. You will do a more effective job if you operate without that knowledge."

"Twelve percent of the population have Adventurer personality structures. They're a sizable minority. They tend to be popular and influential. I can't ignore their feelings. Does my own personality structure help me balance all the relevant factors?"

"It could. We are only machines, Overseer. We can assign numerical weights to emotions. We cannot feel the emotions ourselves."

Varosa Uman stood up. A high, almost invisible dot had folded its wings against its side, and turned into a lethal fury plummeting toward the waves. She adjusted her eyes to ten power and watched hard talons drive into a sea animal that had wandered into the wrong area.

"I'm going to let the study committee do its work. But I have to conclude Mansita Jano is correct. We can't let Revutev Mavarka send a warning message. I can feel the tensions he's creating just by threatening to do it. But we can't just arrest him. And we can't just isolate him, either. The Adventurer community might be small, but it could become dangerously angry if we took that kind of action against one of the most popular figures in the community while he's still doing things most Adventurers consider harmless rule bending."

"Have you developed an alternative?"

"The best solution would be a victory for the Trans Cultural visitation. Arranged so it looked like they won on their own."

She turned away from the ocean. "I'll need two people with expertise in war fighting tactics. I think two should be the right number. I'll need a survey of all the military planning resources you can give me."

The Integrators had been the primary solution to the conflicts created by the cornucopia contained in the Message. The Integrators managed the technology that produced all the wonders the Message offered. Every individual on the planet could receive all the goods and services a properly modified Serene could desire merely by asking, without any of the effort previous generations had categorized as "work."

But who would select the people who would oversee the Integrators? Why the Integrators, of course. The Integrators selected the Overseers. And obeyed the orders of the people they had appointed.

The system worked. It had worked for three thousand years. Could it last forever? Could anything last forever?

The winged toad that made the contact had a larger wingspan and a brighter set of feathers than the creature that had approached Betzino-Resdell. Trans Cultural greeted it with its standard rebuff.

"I can only establish contacts with entities that represent significant concentrations of intellectual and governmental authority."

"This is an extra-channel contact—an unofficial contact by a party associated with the entity who has already established communications. Does your programming allow for that kind of contact?"

Trans Cultural paused for 3.6 seconds while it searched its files and evaluated the terms it had been given.

"How do I know you are associated with that entity?"

"I can't offer you any proof. You must evaluate my proposal on its merits. I can provide you with aid that could give you a decisive victory in your conflict with Betzino-Resdell."

"Please wait . . . Why are you offering to do this?"

"Your conflict is creating disruptions in certain balances in our society. I can't describe the balances at present. But we share your concern about contacts between unrepresentative entities."

"Please continue."

Varosa Uman's instructions to Mansita Jano had been a flawless example of the kind of carefully balanced constraints that always exasperated her when somebody dropped them on her. Do this without doing that. Do that without doing this.

Betzino-Resdell had to be neutralized. Revutev Mavarka's link to the humans had to be severed. But Mansita Jano must arrange things so the second visitor collapsed before Revutev Mavarka realized it was happening—before Revutev Mavarka had time to do something foolish. And it should all happen, of course, without any *visible* help from anyone *officially* responsible for the response to the Visitation.

"We could have avoided all this," Mansita Jano had said, "if the Message had been transmitted the day after Revutev Mavarka approached the second visitor. I presume everyone involved in all this extended decision making realizes that."

"The Message will be transmitted to the Trans Cultural device as soon as Betzino-Resdell is neutralized."

"You've made a firm decision? There are no unstated qualifications?"

"The Message will be transmitted as soon as Betzino-Resdell is neutralized. My primary concern is the unpredictability of the humans. We don't know how they'll respond to an overt attack on one of their emissaries—even an emissary that appears to be as poorly connected as the Betzino-Resdell jumble."

"If I were in your position, Overseer, I would have Revutev Mavarka arrested right now. I will do my best. But he's just as unpredictable as our visitors. He isn't just a

charming rogue. He isn't offering us a little harmless flirtation with our vestigial appetites for Adventure."

It was the most explicit expression of his feelings Mansita Jano had thrown at her. *If I were in your position . . . as I should be . . . if the Integrators hadn't intervened. . . . if you could keep your own weaknesses under control . . .* But who could blame him? She had just told him he was supposed to tiptoe through a maze of conflicting demands. Created by someone who seemed to be ruled by her own internal conflicts.

They were meeting face to face, under maximum sealed-room security. She could have placed her hand on the side of his face, like a Halna of the TaraTin Empire offering a strikejav a gesture of support. But that would obviously be a blunder.

"I know it's a difficult assignment, Mansita Jano. I would do it myself, if I could. But I can't. So I'm asking for help from the best person available. Everything we know about Revutev Mavarka indicates he won't do anything until he feels desperate. He knows he'll be committing an irrevocable act. Get the job done while he's still hesitating and he'll probably feel relieved."

The Message had to be sent. The humans were obviously just as divided and unpredictable as every other species that had ever launched machines at the stars. They were probably even more unpredictable. Their planet apparently had a large moon they could use as an easy launch site. Its gravitational field appeared to be weaker, too. A species that could spread through its own planetary system had to be more divided than a species that had confined itself to one planet.

Mansita Jano could have handed Trans Cultural the exact location of the Betzino-Resdell base, but that would have been too obvious. Instead, Trans Cultural's scouts were gently herded in the right direction over the course of a year. Predators pursued them. Winds and storms blew them off the courses set by their search patterns.

Betzino-Resdell had located its base in the middle levels of a mountain range, next to a waterfall that supplied it with 80.5 percent of its energy. A deep, raging stream defended one side of the base and a broad, equally deep ditch protected the other borders. A high tangle of toxic thicket covered the ground behind the ditch.

Trans Cultural set up three bases of its own and started producing an army. It was obviously planning a swarm attack—the kind of unimaginative strategy machines tended to adapt. Revutev Mavarka evaluated the situation and decided Betzino-Resdell could handle the onslaught, with a little advice from a friendly organic imagination.

"You can't stop the buildup," Revutev Mavarka said, "but you can slow it down with well planned harassment raids."

Betzino consulted with her colleagues. They had all started working on projects that had interested them. The Institute for Spiritual Research was particularly reluctant to divert resources from its researches. "Donald" had made some remarks that set it looking for evidence the resident population still engaged in religious rituals.

The alter that called itself Ivan represented an individual who could best be described as a serial hobbyist. The original organic Ivan had spent decades exploring military topics and the alter had inherited an impulse to apply that knowledge. Betzino-Resdell voted to devote 50.7 percent of its resources to defense.

Revutev Mavarka had decided religion was a safe topic. He could discuss all the religious beliefs his species had developed before the Turbulence without telling Betzino-Resdell anything about his current society.

The Betzino-Resdell subunits had obviously adopted the same policy. The subunit

that called itself the Institute for Spiritual Research led him through an overview of the different beliefs the humans had developed and he responded with a similar overview he had selected from the hundreds of possibilities stored in the libraries.

Revutev Mavarka had experimented with religion during two of his awakes—most of a full lifespan by the standards of most pre-Turbulence societies. He had spent eleven years in complete isolation from all social contact, to see if isolation would grant him the insights the Halfen Reclusives claimed to have achieved.

He could see similar patterns in the religions both species had invented. Religious leaders on both worlds seemed to agree that insight and virtue could only be achieved through some form of deprivation.

As for those who sought excitement and the tang of novelty—they were obviously a threat to every worthy who tried to stay on the True Road.

The religious studies were only a diversion—a modest attempt to achieve some insight into the minds that had created the two visitors. The emotion that colored every second of Revutev Mavarka's life was his sense of impending doom.

He had already composed the Warning he would transmit to Betzino-Resdell. He could blip it at any time, with a three-word, two-number instruction to his communications system.

The moment he sent it—the instant he committed that irrevocable act—he would become the biggest traitor in the history of his species.

How many centuries would he spend in dormancy? Would they ever let him wake? Would he still be lying there when his world died in the explosion that transformed every mundane yellow star into a bloated red monster?

Every meal he ate—every woman he caressed—every view he contemplated—could be his last.

"You've acquired an aura, Reva," his closest female confidante said.

"Is it attractive? I'd hate to think I was surrounded by something repulsive."

"It has its appeal. Has one of your quests actually managed to affect something deeper than a yen for a temporary stimulus?"

"I think I've begun to understand those people who claim it doesn't matter whether you live fifty years or a million. You're still just a flicker in the life of the universe."

"He's savoring the possibility," Varosa Uman told her husband.

"Like one of those people who contemplate suicide? And finish their awake still thinking about it?"

"I have to assume he could do it."

"It seems to me it would be the equivalent of suicide. Given the outrage most people would feel."

"We would have to give him the worst punishment the public mood demands—whatever it takes to restore calm."

"You're protecting him from his own impulses, love. You shouldn't forget that. You aren't just protecting us. You're protecting him."

It was all a matter of arithmetic. Trans Cultural was obviously building up a force that could overwhelm Betzino-Resdell's defenses. At some point, it would command a horde that could cross the ditch and gnaw its way through the toxic hedge by sheer weight of numbers. Betzino-Resdell could delay that day by raiding Trans Cultural's breeding camps and building up the defensive force gathered behind the hedge. But sooner or later Trans Cultural's superior resources would overcome Betzino-Resdell's best efforts.

The military hobbyist in the Betzino-Resdell community had worked the numbers.

"They will achieve victory level in 8.7 terrestrial years," Ivan advised his colleagues. "Plus or minus .3 terrestrial years. We can extend that by 2.7 terrestrial years if we increase our defensive allocation to 60 percent of our resources."

Betzino voted to continue the current level and the other members of the community concurred. Their sponsors in the Solar System would continue to receive reports on the researches and explorations that interested them.

Revutev Mavarka inspected their plan and ran it through two of the military planning routines he found in the libraries. 8.7 terrestrial years equaled six of his own world's orbits. He could postpone his doom a little longer.

"We are going to plant a few concealed devices at promising locations," Betzino-Resdell told him. "They will attempt to establish new bases after this one is destroyed. Our calculations indicate Trans Cultural can destroy any base it locates before the base can achieve a secure position, but the calculation includes variables with wide ranges. It could be altered by unpredictable possibilities. We will reestablish contact with you if the variables and unpredictable possibilities work in our favor and we establish a new defensible base."

"I'll be looking forward to hearing from you," Revutev Mavarka said.

They were only machines. They couldn't fool themselves into thinking an impossible plan was certain to succeed.

The weather fell into predictable patterns all over the planet. The Serenes had arranged it that way. Citizens who liked warm weather could live in cities where the weather stayed within a range they found comfortable and pleasant. Citizens who enjoyed the passage of the seasons could settle where the seasons rotated across the land in a rhythm that was so regular it never varied by more than three days.

But no system could achieve perfect, planet-wide predictability. There were places where three or four weather patterns adjoined and minor fluctuations could create sudden shifts. Revutev Mavarka lived, by choice, in a city located in an area noted for its tendency to lurch between extremes.

Sudden big snowfalls were one of his favorite lurches. One day you might be sitting in an outdoor cafe, dressed in light clothes, surrounded by people whose feathers glowed in the sunlight. The next you could be trudging through knee high snow, plodding toward a place where those same feathers would respond to the mellow light of an oversize fireplace.

He had just settled into a table only a few steps from such a fireplace when his communication system jerked his attention away from the snowing song he and six of his friends had started singing.

"You have a priority message. Your observers are tracking a Category One movement."

His hands clutched the edge of the table. He lowered his head and shifted his system to subvocalization mode. The woman on the other side of the table caught his eye and he tried to look like he was receiving a message that might lead to a cozier kind of pleasure.

Category One was a mass movement toward the Betzino-Resdell base—a swarm attack.

*How many observers are seeing it?*

"Seven."

*How many criteria does the observation satisfy?*

"All."

His clothes started warming up as soon as he stepped outside. He crunched across the snow bathed in the familiar, comforting sense that he was wrapped in a warm cocoon surrounded by a bleak landscape. It had only been three and a half years

since Trans Cultural had started building up its forces. How could they attack now? With a third of the forces they needed?

*Has Betzino-Resdell been warned? Are they preparing a defense?*

"Yes."

He activated his stage and gave it instructions while he was walking back to his apartment. By the time he settled into his viewing chair, the stage was showing him an aerial view, with most of the vegetation deleted. The trees still supported their foliage in the area where the base was located.

The display had colored Trans Cultural's forces white for easy identification. Betzino-Resdell's defenders had been anointed with a shimmering copper. The white markers were flowing toward the base in three clearly defined streams. They were all converging, dumbly and obviously, on one side of the ditch. A bar at the top of the display estimated the streams contained four to six thousand animals. Trans Cultural was attacking with a force that exactly matched his estimates of their strength—a force that couldn't possibly make its way through the defenses Betzino-Resdell had developed.

There could only be one explanation. Somebody had to be helping it.

"Position. Betzino-Resdell orbiter. Insert."

A diagram popped onto the display. Trans Cultural had launched its attack just after the orbiter had passed over the base.

The antenna built into the rock face couldn't be maneuvered. The base could only communicate with the orbiter when the orbiter was almost directly overhead. Trans Cultural—and its unannounced allies—had timed the attack so he couldn't send his warning message until the orbiter completed another passage around the planet.

He could transmit it now, of course. Betzino-Resdell could store the Warning and relay it when the orbiter made its next pass. But the whole situation would change the moment he gave the order. The police would seal off his apartment before he could take three steps toward the door.

Up until now he had been engaging in the kind of borderline activity most Adventurers played with. The record would show he had limited his contacts with Betzino-Resdell to harmless exchanges. He could even argue he had accumulated useful information about the visitors and their divisions.

"Have you considered isolating him?" Mansita Jano said. "It might be a sensible precaution, given the tension he's under."

Varosa Uman had been eating a long afternoon meal with Siti. She had been thinking, idly, of the small, easy pleasures that might follow. And found herself sitting in front of a stage crowded with a view of the battle and headshots of Mansita Jano and her most reliable aides.

She could cut Revutev Mavarka's electronic links any time she wanted to. But it would be an overt act. Some people would even feel it was more drastic than physical restraint.

"He's an emotional, unstable personality confronted with a powerful challenge," Mansita Jano said. "He could send a warning message at any time. If they manage to relay it to the backup system they've set up, before you can stop them . . ."

"He knows what we'll do to him if he sends a warning," Varosa Uman said. "He has every reason to think Trans Cultural has made a blunder and the attack is going to fail."

"He's an emotional, unpredictable personality, Overseer. I apologize for sounding like a recording, but there are some realities that can't be overemphasized."

Siti had positioned himself on her right, out of range of the camera. She glanced

at him and he put down his bowl and crossed his wrists in front of his face, as if he was shielding himself from a blow.

Mansita Jano had placed his advice on the record. If his arrangement with Trans Cultural failed—whatever the arrangement was—he would be shielded.

"This attack cannot succeed," Betzino-Resdell said. "We have repeated our analyses. This attack can only succeed if it contains some element we are not aware of."

"I've come to the same conclusion," Revutev Mavarka said.

"We are proceeding with our defensive plan. We have made no modifications. We would like more information, if you have any."

A tactical diagram floated over the image of the advancing hordes. Most of Betzino-Resdell's defensive forces would mass behind the toxic hedge, in the area the attackers seemed to be threatening. A small mobile reserve would position itself in the center of the base.

"I suggest you concentrate your mobile reserve around the antenna."

"Why do you advise that?"

"I believe the antenna is their primary objective. They will try to destroy your connection with your orbiter if they break through the hedge."

"Why will they make the antenna their primary objective? Our plans assume their primary objectives will be our energy transmission network and our primary processing units."

"Can you defend yourself if you lose contact with your orbiter?"

"Yes."

Betzino-Resdell had paused before it had answered. It had been a brief pause—an almost undetectable flicker, by the standards of organic personalities—but his brain had learned to recognize the minute signals a machine threw out.

He had been assuming Betzino-Resdell's operations were still controlled by the orbiter. He had assumed the unit on the ground transmitted information and received instructions when the orbiter passed over. That might have been true in the beginning. By now, Betzino-Resdell could have transmitted complete copies of itself to the ground. The ground copies could be the primaries. The copies on the orbiter could be the backups.

"Are you assuming you can keep operating on the ground if you stop this attack and they destroy the antenna? And build a new antenna in the future?"

"... Yes."

"What if that doesn't work out? Isn't there some possibility your rival could gain strength and destroy your new antenna before you can finish it?"

"Why are you emphasizing the antenna? Do you have some information we don't have?"

*I have an important message I want to transmit to your home planet. The future of your entire species could depend on it.*

"I was thinking about the individuals who sent you. Your explorations won't be of much value to them if you can't communicate with your orbiter."

"Our first priority is the survival of our surface capability. Our simulations indicate we can survive indefinitely and could eventually reestablish contact with our orbiter. Do you have information that indicates we should reassess our priorities?"

Revutev Mavarka tipped back his head. His hands pressed against the thick, deliberately ragged feathers that adorned the sides of his face. He was communicating with the visitor through a voice-only link, as always. He didn't have to hide his emotions behind the bland mask the Serenes offered the world.

"I've given you the best advice I can give you at present. I recommend that you place a higher priority on the antenna."

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"He's still struggling with his conflicts," Varosa Uman said. "He could have given them a stronger argument."

She had turned to Siti again. She could still hear the exhortations she was receiving from her aides, but she had switched off her own vocal feed.

"Mansita Jano would probably say he's watching *two* personalities struggle with their internal conflicts," Siti said.

Varosa Uman's display had adapted the same color scheme Revutev Mavarka was watching. The white markers had reached the long slope in front of the ditch. The three columns were converging into a single mass. Winged creatures were fighting over the space above their backs.

"It looks like they're starting their final assault," Siti said. "Do you have any idea what kind of fearsome warriors your white markers represent?"

"They seem to be a horde of small four-legged animals native to the visitors' planet. They breed very fast. And they have sharp teeth and claws."

"They're going to *bite* their way through the hedge? With one of them dying every time they take a bite?"

"That seems to be the plan."

Revutev Mavarka stepped up to the display and waved his hand over the area covered by the white markers.

"Calculation. Estimate number of organisms designated by white marking."

A number floated over the display. The horde racing up the slope contained, at most, six thousand, four hundred animals.

The three columns had merged into a single dense mass. He could see the entire assault force. The estimate had to be correct.

He activated his connection to Betzino-Resdell. "I have an estimate of six thousand, four hundred for the assault force. Does that match your estimate?"

"Yes."

"Your calculations still indicate the attack will fail?"

"Four thousand will die biting their way through the hedge. The rest will be overwhelmed by our defensive force."

Machines were only machines. Imagination required conscious, self-aware minds. *Adventurous* self-aware minds. But they were talking about a straightforward calculation. Trans Cultural had to know its attack couldn't succeed.

"Can you think of any reason why Trans Cultural has launched this attack at this time?" Revutev Mavarka said. "Is there some factor you haven't told me about?"

"We have examined all the relevant factors stored in our libraries. We have only detected one anomaly. They are advancing on a wider front than our simulations recommend. Do you know of any reason why they would do that?"

"How much wider is it?"

"Over one third."

"Do they have a military routine comparable to yours?"

"We have made no assumptions about the nature of their military routine."

Revutev Mavarka stared at the display. Would the attackers be easier to defeat if they were spread out? Would they be more vulnerable if they were compacted into a tight mass? There must be some optimum combination of width and density. Could he be certain Betzino-Resdell's military routine had made the right calculation?

How much secret help had Trans Cultural received?

"One member of our community still wants to know why you think we should place a higher priority on the antenna," Betzino-Resdell said. "She insists that we ask you again."

\* \* \*

The first white markers had leaped into the ditch. Paws were churning under the water. Betzino-Resdell's defenders were spreading out behind the hedge, to cover the extra width of the assault.

*Transmit this message to your home planet at once. The Message you will receive from our civilization is a dangerous trap. It contains the combined knowledge of twenty-three civilizations, translated into the languages you have given us. It will give you untold wealth, life without death, an eternity of comfort and ease. But that is only the promise. It will throw your entire civilization into turmoil when you try to absorb its gifts. You may never recover. The elimination of death is particularly dangerous. The Message is not a friendly act. We are sending it to you for the same reason it was sent to us. To protect ourselves. To defend ourselves against the disruption you will cause if we remain in contact.*

It was a deliberately short preliminary alarm. They would have the whole text in their storage banks half an eyeblink after he subvocalized the code that would activate transmission. A longer follow-up, with visual details of the Turbulence, would take two more blinks.

The initiation code consisted of two short numbers and three unrelated words from three different extinct languages—a combination he couldn't possibly confuse with anything else he might utter.

Would they believe it? Would the people who received it on the human world dismiss it because it came from a vehicle that had been assembled by a group of individuals who were probably just as marginal and unrepresentative as the eccentric who sent the warning?

Some of them might dismiss it. Some of them might believe it. Did it matter? Something unpredictable would be added to the situation—something the Integrators and Varosa Uman would have to face knowing they were taking risks and struggling with unknowns no matter what they did.

The animals in the front line of the assault force had reached the hedge. White markers covered a section of the ditch from side to side. Teeth were biting into poisoned stems.

The hedge wavered. The section in front of the assault force shook as if it had been pummeled by a sudden wind. A wall of dust rose into the air.

Varosa Uman would have given Mansita Jano an immediate burst of praise if she could have admitted she knew he was responsible. She had understood what he'd done as soon as she realized the hedge was sinking into the ground.

There would be no evidence they had helped Trans Cultural. Some individuals might suspect it, but the official story would be believable enough. Trans Cultural had somehow managed to undermine the ground under the hedge. An explosion had collapsed the mine at the best possible time and the defenders were being taken by surprise.

The assault force still had to cross the ruins of the hedge, but they had apparently prepared a tactic. The front rank died and the next rank clambered over them. Line by line, body by body, the animals extended a carpet over the gap. Most of them would make it across. Betzino-Resdell's defenders would be outnumbered.

Trans Cultural couldn't have dug the mine. They didn't have the resources to dig the mine while they were preparing the attack. Revutev Mavarka could prove it. But would anyone believe him?

The first white markers had crossed the ditch. The front ranks were ripping at each other with teeth and claws. Flyers struggled in the dust above the collapse.

White markers began to penetrate the copper masses. The mobile reserve retreated toward the installations that housed Betzino-Resdell's primary processing units.

A white column emerged from the hedge on the right end of the line—the end closest to the antenna. It turned toward the antenna and started gathering speed.

*"Defend the antenna. You must defend the antenna."*

"What are you hiding from us? You must give us more information. What is happening? Trans Cultural couldn't have dug that mine. They didn't have the resources."

Revutev Mavarka stared at the white markers scurrying toward the antenna. Could Betzino-Resdell's mobile reserve get there in time if they responded to his pleas? Would it make any difference?

The antenna was doomed. The best defense they could put up would buy him, at best, a finite, slightly longer interval of indecision.

Two numbers.

Three words.

*Blip.*

"You must destroy the antenna," Mansita Jano said. "He's given you all the excuse you need."

Varosa Uman had already given the order. She had placed a missile on standby when Trans Cultural had launched its attack. Revutev Mavarka had committed the unforgivable act. She could take any action she deemed necessary.

The missile rose out of an installation she had planted on an island in the lake. Police advanced on Revutev Mavarka's apartment. The image on his display stage disappeared. Jammers and switches cut every link that connected him to the outside world.

Three of the Betzino-Resdell programs voted to transmit Donald's message at once. Ivan argued for transmission on impeccable military grounds. Donald had told them they should defend the antenna. He had obviously given them the message because he believed the antenna was about to be destroyed. They must assume, therefore, that the antenna *was* about to be destroyed. They could evaluate the message later.

Betzino raised objections. Could they trust Donald? Did they have enough information?

They argued for 11.7 seconds. At 11.8 seconds they transmitted the message to their backup transmission route. At 11.9 seconds, Varosa Uman's missile shattered the surface of the antenna and melted most of the metal veneer.

Varosa Uman had been searching for the alternate transmission route ever since Revutev Mavarka had told Betzino-Resdell it should create it. It couldn't be hidden forever. It had to include a second antenna and the antenna had to be located along the track the orbiter traced across the surface of the planet.

But it wouldn't expose itself until it was activated. It could lie dormant until the moment it transmitted. It could store a small amount of energy and expend it in a single pulse.

*"Neutralize their orbiter," Mansita Jano said. "Isolate it."*

Varosa Uman checked the track of the Betzino-Resdell orbiter. It had completed over half its orbit.

"And what happens when we give Trans Cultural the Message?" Varosa Uman asked. "After we've committed an overtly hostile act?"

"You've already committed an overtly hostile act. Trans Cultural knows my emissary had some kind of covert official support. Why are you hesitating, Overseer? What is your problem?"

\*\*\*

Machines might be unimaginative, but they were thorough. Ivan had designed the backup transmission route and he had built in all the redundancy he could squeeze out of the resources his colleagues had given him. Three high speed, low visibility airborne devices set off in three different directions as soon as they received the final message from the base. One stopped twelve kilometers from its starting point and relayed the message to a transmitter built into the highest tree on a small rise. The transmitter had been sucking energy from the tree's biochemistry for three years. It responded by concentrating all that accumulated energy into a single blip that shot toward a transmitter stored in a winged scavenger that circled over a grassy upland.

Varosa Uman's surveillance routine had noted the flying scavenger and stored it in a file that included several hundred items of interest. It picked up the blip as soon as the scavenger relayed it and narrowed the area in which its patrols were working their search patterns. A flyer that resembled a terrestrial owl suicide-bombed the hidden antenna half a second before the blip reached it.

The other two high-speed airborne devices veered toward the northern and southern edges of the orbiter's track. Relays emitted their once-in-a-lifetime blasts and settled into permanent quiet.

The antenna located along the northern edge of the track succumbed to a double suicide by two slightly faster updates of the owlish suicider. The third antenna picked up the orbiter as the little ball raced over a dense forest. It fulfilled its destiny twenty seconds before a pre-positioned missile splashed a corrosive liquid over the electronic veneer the antenna had spread across an abandoned nest.

Revutev Mavarka went into dormancy as if he was going to his death. He said goodbye to his closest friends. He crammed his detention quarters with images of his favorite scenes and events. He even managed to arrange a special meal and consume it with deliberate pleasure before they emptied out his stomach.

The only omission was a final statement to the public. A private message from Varosa Uman had curtailed his deliberations in that area. *Don't waste your time*, the Situation Overseer had said, and he had accepted her advice with the melancholy resignation of someone who knew his conscious life had to be measured in heartbeats, not centuries.

Four armed guards escorted him to his dormancy unit. A last pulse of fear broke through his self-control when he felt the injector touch his bare shoulder.

The top of the unit swung back. Varosa Uman looked down at him. Technicians were removing the attachments that connected him to the support system.

"Please forgive our haste," Varosa Uman said. "There will be no permanent damage."

There were no windows in the room. The only decoration was a street level cityscape that filled the wall directly in front of him. He was still lying on the medical cart that had trundled him through a maze of corridors and elevator rides, but Varosa Uman's aides had raised his upper body and maneuvered him into a bulky amber wrapper before they filed out of the room.

"You're still managing the visitation, Overseer?"

"The Integrators won't budge," Varosa Uman said. "The Principals keep putting limits on my powers, but they can't get rid of me."

He had been dormant for one hundred and three years. He had asked her as soon as he realized he was coming out of dormancy and she had handed him the information while they were working the wrapper around the tubes and wires that connected him to the cart.

"I've spent much of the last ten years trying to convince the Overseers they should let me wake you," Varosa Uman said. "I got you out of there as soon as they gave me permission."

"Before they changed their minds?"

A table with a flagon and a plate of food disks sat beside the cart. He reached for a disk and she waited while he put it in his mouth and savored his first chew.

"You want something from me," he said.

"The two visitors still have bases on the third moon of Widial—complete with backup copies of all their subunits. I want to contact them with an offer. We will try to guide their species through the Turbulence—try to help them find responses that will reduce the havoc. It's an idea I had earlier. I had a study group explore it. But I fell back into the pattern we've all locked into our reactions."

The men strolling through the cityscape were wearing tall hats and carrying long poles—a fashion that had no relation to anything Revutev Mavarka had encountered in any of the millennia he had lived through.

One hundred and three years . . .

"There are things we can tell them," Varosa Uman said. "We can end the cycle of attack and isolation every civilization in our section of the galaxy seems to be trapped in."

"You're raising an obvious question, Overseer."

"I want you to join me when I approach the visitors. I need support from the Adventurer community."

"And you think they'll fall in behind me?"

"Some of them will. Some of them hate you just as much as most Serenes hate you. But you're a hero to 40 percent of them. And the data indicate most of the rest should be recruitable."

He raised his arms as if he were orating in front of an audience. Tubes dangled from his wrists.

"Serenes and Adventurers will join together in a grand alliance! And present the humans with a united species!"

"I couldn't offer the humans a united front if every Adventurer on the planet joined us. We aren't a united species any more. We stopped being a united species when you sent your warning."

"You said you still had the support of the Integrators."

"There's been a revolt against the Integrators. Mansita Jano refused to accept their decision to keep me in charge of the Visitation."

"We're at war? We're going through another Turbulence?"

"No one has died. Yet. Hundreds of people have been forced into dormancy on both sides. Some cities are completely controlled by Mansita Jano's supporters. We have a serious rift in our society—so serious it could throw us into another Turbulence if we don't do something before more visitors arrive from the human system. If we make the offer and the humans accept—I think most people will fall in behind the idea."

"But you feel you need the support of the Adventurer community?"

"Yes."

The men in the cityscape tapped their poles when they stopped to talk. The ribbons dangling from the ends of the poles complemented the color of their facial feathers.

"That's a risk in itself, Overseer. Why would the Serenes join forces with a mob of irresponsible risk takers? Why would anyone follow *me*? Everything they had ended when I sent my warning."

"You're underestimating yourself. You're a potent figure. I'll lose some Serenes, but the projections all indicate I'll get most of the Adventurer community in exchange."

You may look like an irresponsible innovator to most Serenes, but most of your own people see you as an innovator who was willing to set a third of the galaxy on a new course."

"And what do you see, Varosa Uman?"

"I see an irresponsible interloper who may have opened up a new possibility. And placed our entire species in peril."

"And if I don't help you pursue your great enterprise I'll be shoved into a box."

"I want your willing cooperation. I want you to rally your community behind the biggest adventure our species has ever undertaken—the ultimate proof that we need people with your personality structure."

"You want to turn an irritating escapader into a prophet?"

"Yes."

"Speech writers? Advisers? Presentation specialists?"

"You'll get the best we have. I've got a communications facility in the next room. I'd like you to sit through a catch-up review. Then we'll send a simultaneous transmission to both visitors."

"You're moving very fast. Are you afraid someone will stop you?"

"I want to present our entire population—opponents and supporters—with an accomplished act. Just like you did."

"They could turn on you just like they turned on me. The revolt against the Integrators could intensify. The humans may reject your offer."

"We've examined the possibilities. We can sit here and let things happen or we can take the best choice in a bad list and try to make it work."

"You're still acting like a gambler. Are you sure they didn't make a mistake when they classified you?"

"You take risks because you like it. I take risks because I have to."

"But you're willing to do it. You don't automatically reach for the standard course."

"Will you help me, Revutev Mavarka? Will you stand beside me in one of the boldest moments in the history of intelligence?"

"In the history of intelligence, Overseer?"

"That's what it is, isn't it? We'll be disrupting a chain of self-isolating intelligent species—a chain that's been creeping across our section of the galaxy for hundreds of millennia."

He picked up another food disk. It was dull stuff—almost tasteless—but it supplemented the nutrients from the cart with material that would activate his digestive path. It was, when you thought about it, exactly the kind of food the more extreme Serenes would *want* to encounter when they came out of dormancy.

"Since you put it that way . . ." O

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This two-time Nebula award winner for short story and author of dozens of novels, has lately been having "much too much fun writing young adult historicals." Her latest titles include *Sphinx's Princess* and *Sphinx's Queen*, about young Nefertiti, for Random House and *Threads and Flames*, a novel about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, for Viking/Penguin. Esther is currently at work on two new YA historicals for Random house, *Spirit's Princess* and *Spirit's Bride*, about Queen Himiko of Japan. Her newest story for Asimov's is decidedly not a young adult tale. In this bawdy seaport yarn, a plucky young woman finds she must make the most of her charms and her wit if once again she is to be . . .

# THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Esther M. Friesner

"**Y**ou're not from around here, are you, miss?"

I looked up from my beer into the face of the young sailor who'd finally gotten the courage to come over to my table.

*And about time, too, I thought. The sorry swab's spent most of the evening eyeing me from his barstool. I thought he'd never find the nerve. Now let's see how fast he can get down to business.*

I knew he was a sailor. If there's one thing I know, it's sailors. I can always tell a seafaring man. Mostly I can tell him, "Stop touching that until you pay for it," but do they ever listen? Bunch of big apes, the lot of them; apes crossed with octopi.

"Yeah, you're right, I'm not a local girl. What was your first clue?" I replied, craning my neck to meet his gaze. I gave him a demure, close-lipped smile. Very close-lipped. Never tip your hand too soon, that's what I say. When the men get a load of my *real* smile, it either sends them scampering for the hills or it seals the deal (especially when the seadog's as drunk as blazes and in company with his just-as-drunk buddies, all of them daring him to take me on after *that*). Either way, I get something out of the transaction: Business or amusement. Hey, bless Roosevelt, but there's still a Depression on! A girl's got to eat, and if I can't find a paying customer, at least I'm entitled to a few laughs.

"Well, uh, you remind me of my mother." He rubbed the back of his head and looked sheepish. "There's a very strong resemblance. She was from . . . elsewhere, too."

His mother? He thought that *I* looked like the woman who gave birth to *him*? That was a new one. I studied my new admirer carefully, top to toe. He was wearing the

same outfit favored by most of the ragtag seamen I'd endured—I mean, encountered—ever since I'd left home years ago. Sailors who aren't Navy men or part of the crew aboard the big, swanky ocean liners wear their own kind of uniform that's not so much the clothes themselves as the smell: brine and bilge and *bacalao*. They also tend to come from a mixed bag of bloodlines, but this guy . . .

"Your mother," I said, mouthing the words like they were a chunk of hardtack that needed a lot of work before you could swallow it. "Honey, why don't you have a seat? It's bad enough, having to tell a handsome man he's crazy, but I don't want to get a stiff neck while I'm doing it." It took him a moment to accept the invitation. Poor little lamb, he looked like he'd never had a woman say one kind word to him. If this turned out the way I hoped it would, he'd be easy pickings. The pathetic ones always pay more.

"Lay your hand down next to mine," I told him, and when he obeyed, I repeated, "Your mother?" For there it was, on the table before us, one very obvious and unquestionable piece of evidence: His hand was the pasty shade I'd seen on the bellies of countless cod and multitudes of mackerel. My own was dark as night, black as coal, and it looked even blacker peeking out of the frilly white cuff of my blouse. "Sweetheart, either Gregor Mendel was full of beans or you're a liar." I said it gently, trying to honey up the sting of my words with a light tone. Not that I was afraid to give him some lip. I could tell that my little fish wanted me too much to get mad and swim away over a bit of ribbing.

He stared at our hands, then at me. "You know who Gregor Mendel was?"

"Yes," I replied dryly. "In my tribe, you don't get to have a bone shoved through your nose until after you pass an intelligence test." I caught him slipping a look at my nose and added: "That was a joke. In my tribe, only the men get bones."

"Was that another joke?" He looked nervous.

I hated to admit it, but he was kind of cute when he got all flustered. Maybe it was the way his eyes bulged out, maybe the way his ample lips started quivering, or maybe I'd developed a soft spot for how helpless a weak-chinned man can look, whether or not he *is* helpless.

I tried to set him at ease with a laugh. "Sorry, baby. Looks like my sense of humor's from out of town, too. I don't blame you for acting surprised that I know about Mendel, but I do. I'm a quick study. You'd be shocked by how fast I learned English."

"You do speak it very well," he said shyly.

"Yeah, not bad if I do say so myself, considering I got my first lessons from a tramp steamer bilge rat. I pick up new things faster than a really nice guy picks up the next round of drinks." I gave him another tight-lipped smile and a meaningful look.

He was no slouch at taking a hint. He had a couple of fresh beers in front of us before I could tell him to make mine a whiskey. I don't mind beer, but the swill they served in that dockside dump was so bad it almost made you wish the Volstead Act was still in force. At least the Rhode Island bootleggers would bring in a quality product. I opened wide to drain half my glass in one gulp and said, "Not bad, but where I come from, we're used to stronger stuff."

"You mean kava?" he asked. Oooh, smart boy.

"Where did you learn about kava? From your mama?" I asked, giving him a sidelong smile. When he nodded, I said: "Kava's what those Pacific island lightweights drink. It's nothing next to our homebrew. I'm not being a snob about it; it's just that your mama's ancestors didn't *need* to drink mule-kick happyjuice as much as mine." Wasn't that the truth! The worst case of bathtub gin D.T.s would be a sweet vacation from some of the things we had to see cold sober, back on—back in the old neighborhood.

"You're—so you're not from the Pacific islands?" He looked disappointed. "I thought that for sure, with teeth like that."

That brought me up short. And here I thought I was being so coy, so careful! Too late, I covered my mouth with one hand and muttered through the fingers: "When did you see my teeth?"

"Begging your pardon, miss, but you can't swallow half a beer at one go the way you did and hope to keep something like *that* a secret. Or something like *this*." It was his turn to smile, and he did it with lips stretched so wide I could've sworn that the dimples at the corners of his mouth came within an inch of his ears. That was weird enough, but trumped completely by what those lips had been hiding, up to now.

My hand and my jaw dropped at the same time. I stared amazed at a double row of teeth that were as white as new snow, as sturdy as a good stone wall, and as lethally pointed as a set of daggers.

Which was also a fair and accurate description of the secret shark-like dentist's nightmare in my own mouth. (Well, secret until that telltale glass of beer.)

In an instant, his lips clamped shut again and he favored me with the same sort of close-mouthed smile that was my usual specialty. "I take after my father's people rather strongly, but Mamma insisted that I do *something* to show the world that I'm her son, too. I chose to honor her tribe's tradition when I came of age by submitting to this." He indicated his *very* incisive incisors.

"There are worse customs," I said, remembering the one that had very nearly cost me my life, back home. You know, *some* beauty pageant winners get a tiara, not a death sentence. "The toughest beefsteak turns as tender as a well-aged Porterhouse, once I get my choppers on it." Not that I'd managed to get even the cheapest cuts, these days.

"I agree, miss: There are *much* worse customs in this sorry world." My sailor-boy nodded. "I didn't realize that the ritual practices of my mother's people were so widespread. Where do you hail from, if not the Pacific islands? Borneo, perhaps?"

"Farther west," I said. "Over in the Indian Ocean. You wouldn't have heard of the place. All right, maybe you would've. Do you follow the show business news from New York City?"

He frowned. "Why would I want to do that?"

I shrugged and finished the rest of my beer. "Just asking. You never know. Anyway, I'll bet the whole mess was probably all hushed up by the glad-hand boys on the Chamber of Commerce. Barnum wouldn't approve, but there are some folks who do believe there's such a thing as bad publicity. Can't have the tourists thinking *that* sort of thing happens every day in Manhattan; it'd kill Broadway."

"Uhhhhh . . . you don't say?"

He was looking at me like I was spouting crazy talk. I guess I could've explained things, but why bother? What had happened in New York that night wasn't about *me*. I wish it would have been.

Damn it, it wasn't fair! I went through just as much as that little blond chippie, and her big-shot showbiz pals knew it. Sure, they lost their star attraction, but what was stopping them from salvaging something from their losses by giving *me* a chance in the spotlight? I would've worn my native costume. I would've acted like I couldn't speak a word of English so someone could pretend to translate while I recounted my terrible ordeal in *his* hairy clutches—even though I'd dodged those clutches pretty slickly, if I do say so myself. And if one of those puffed-up producers would've thought to scrape the pavement, salvage what was left of *him*, hire an army of taxidermists to pretty up the remains a bit, and stuck *him* back on stage, I would've screamed on cue like a champ at the results. Hell, I'll bet I could've shrieked loud enough to make the audience believe—just for a moment—that *he* was still alive!

I wouldn't have minded being put on display like that—playing the ignorant, half-

naked, screaming savage—as long as it meant I got fed on a regular basis. An empty belly trumps pride every time. But nobody cared to hear my screams or my story. No one gave a damn about a black girl in danger, just that skinny white blond.

Memories . . . Why are so many of them as bitter as bad beer? I bowed my head over my empty glass. "Sorry about that. You must think I'm nuts," I muttered.

He didn't answer, just cast a glance at my depleted drink and, without being told, brought me a boilermaker.

"Thanks." I knocked it back and smacked my lips. "You're okay."

"So are you." He blushed, I swear! "You're really . . . a very nice girl."

"Awww, you're sweet. I think it's actually going to be a pleasure doing business with you."

"Er, business?" He screwed up his mouth in puzzlement, and with lips that big, it took a *lot* of doing. "What sort of business?"

"You don't know?" Was he pulling my leg? It was hard to tell: He *looked* as if he really was confused. On the off chance that he'd been raised under a rock, I patted his hand and, as gently as I could, I told him exactly how I earned my living. He'd blushed just a bit, before, but by the time I finished my little reveal, his salt-white cheeks were stoplight red.

"You're—you're a—a—?" He looked ready to stammer himself to death, so I stepped in.

"—woman of easy virtue, fair prices, and occasional discounts if I like your face. It's what I do because it's all that I *can* do, except starve or wash dishes. I'd do that—the dishes, I mean—but these days there's always a line that goes halfway around the block for *that* job, and it's a line of white men." I sighed. "I admit, the way I dress isn't exactly typical—" I gestured to include my snowy, long-sleeved blouse and oh-so-demure navy blue skirt, worthy of the primmest Gal Friday. "—but I've discovered that a lot of men get a big kick out of the contrast. Still, I thought you might have known what I am when you saw me in a place like this. You don't find too many debutantes coming in here for a sherry flip and the floor show." He blushed a shade deeper, which led me to add, "Huh! I guess you *didn't* know. You sure you're a sailor?"

"I've—I've led a sheltered life. I come from an isolated little seaside town up the coast a ways and we—we tend to keep to ourselves. I've never sailed on any ship that didn't hail from my home port, and whenever we land, our captain always sees to it that we don't wander off into places where we might run afoul of—of—bad companions."

"Like me?" I gave him an arch look. "How'd you manage to give your captain the slip long enough to sneak into this joint?"

"Sometimes—" He took a deep breath. "Sometimes there's a good enough reason for him to slacken the rules. Every so often, when the time's right and the need's pressing, he lets one of us go off in search of—"

"—companionship?" I suggested.

"—what's necessary."

"Huh! First time I've heard my line of work talked about like that. And you get your turn at a good time only every so often?"

"Yes, thank the powers that be! It's my turn tonight, though I wish it wasn't. I'm not the only one of the lads who feels that way, either, but what can we do? It's a hard thing to break with the way you've been raised and the folk who raised you."

I wish he'd told me something I didn't know. "I've got to say, you and your mates don't sound like the normal run of gobs. Just how isolated *is* that town of yours?"

"Plenty." He managed a bashful smile, his lips wobbling. Funny how appealing they made him look. "Sometimes I think it's a lost world, know what I mean?"

*Did I? I tried not to laugh.*

"Anyway—" he went on, lowering his eyes. "Anyway, it's been nice talking to you, miss. I—I like you. Sorry to have taken up so much of your time." He rose to go.

I grabbed his arm so fast it surprised me. "What's the hurry? I like you, too, and I'm enjoying your company."

"Yes, but—I *like* you. I do. So I'd better get out of here now."

I shook my head. I just didn't get it. "Why?"

"Because—because—" He cast around desperately for an answer before dredging up: "Because business is business, right? And if I'm taking up your time just talking, it's going to keep you from earning your living."

This time I didn't try to hold back my laughter. Hell, no. I laughed so loud it drew the attention of every rum-soaked swabbie in the place, though not for long. One good glimpse of my pearly sharps and they all looked away fast. "Petrified morals and an eye on the cashbox, even when it's not yours? If your town wasn't founded by a bunch of Puritans, I'm Shirley Temple. Did your daddy's side of the family come over on the Mayflower?"

He didn't seem to grasp the fact that I was joking. Dead serious, he replied: "That's what he told me, though the Plymouth elders took our name off the records right after we were sent away from the colony. It was a matter of—religious differences."

I'll bet it was. The sourpuss crew who laid down the law in old Massachusetts were famous for booting out anyone who tried to get them to soften up on doctrine, but I'll bet they also got rid of folks who tried telling them they weren't being strict enough. This boy's forebears were probably too Puritan for the Puritans.

"Tell you what, sweetheart," I said, with a nod to the chair he'd just vacated. "I'm not a career girl all the time. Why don't you sit down and we'll talk some more. I could use a night off."

He sat back down again slowly, with a look on his face as if he couldn't believe his luck. "That's—I'd like that, miss. The only thing is, if one of my shipmates should happen to come by, I might have to run out on you."

"Afraid he'd report you for hanging out with one of those 'bad companions' your captain fears?" I chuckled. "Do what you like, as long as you don't leave me holding the bar bill."

His sweet, shy smile was back. "Would you—would you care for another drink?"

"And a sandwich to keep it company," I answered with a wink.

"Cheese or meat?"

"What do you think?"

It's a good thing neither one of us was too picky about what filled our bellies—him because long sea voyages tend to wean a man off fussing about his food, me because some of the things I'd grown up eating back home on the island would gag a gator. Saloon food down by the docks is mostly ballast for alcohol, and that's how we used it.

We talked while we ate, which wasn't just rude but dangerous when you stop to think about what our teeth looked like. "So tell me," I said, doing my best not to shred my own tongue while simultaneously chewing and making chit-chat. "If you didn't know what I was, why *were* you staring at me for so long?"

"Because I thought you were beautiful," he said so simply that it touched my heart.

"I think I could almost believe you."

"Why can't you?"

"Experience, that's why," I said. "Seeing as how you didn't know my profession until I told you, I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, but usually when a man tells me I'm beautiful, it's just a prelude to trying to get me to drop my price before I drop anything else . . ."

"I wasn't going to do that. But I was going to ask if you'd—" He took a deep breath. "—come away with me."

"Well, I should hope so! The barkeep here's an okay mug, but this joint isn't exactly the place for romance. I've got a room at a hotel close by."

"That's not what I meant," he said, and looked away from me as he added: "I wanted—I wanted to take you home."

"What?" My fingers curled and my forehead creased. I'd heard this one before, too. *Oh, come away with me, my beautiful lass, for I have discovered in a mere instant that I love you beyond all measure! Fly with me now, and I will make an honest woman of you, and you shall never want for anything, all the days of your life!*

Translation: *Forget about haggling over your price, I'm going to pretend I want to marry you so I can get what you're selling for free!*

Maybe this guy wasn't so innocent after all, no matter how naïve he sounded or how harmless he looked. My first white man always said you could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, but I already knew you could catch the most with a carnivorous plant that smelled like rotting meat. In other words, the best bait's what the prey wants most and gets least.

In my line of work, innocence fills the bill.

"So you want to take me home with you? Just like that?" I laughed in his face. "Go fish some other waters with that line, mister. I don't buy the whole love-at-first-sight moonshine."

"Oh." He looked hurt, but managed a weak smile. "It turns out that—that I do." When I gave him the look I reserved for bunco artists who thought a black girl just had to be fool enough to believe anything, he added: "I've made you angry, haven't I? I'm sorry. My mother was rather a passionate, impulsive woman, and it seems I've inherited those traits, though not her subtlety."

"How subtle can she be, a Pacific islander with teeth like *that*, living with a bunch of Puritan leftovers in some calico-and-candle-dipping backwater?" I wondered aloud.

"You'd be surprised at how—" He searched the ceiling for the right word. "—accepting our town can be. We don't judge people by appearances as long as we share the bond of faith. You—you'd fit right in."

I wagged a finger in his face. "If you're going to start that come-away-with-me line again—"

"I won't, I promise, even if what my feelings truly are—" He bit back the words and cast a nervous eye toward the saloon door. "I've really taken up much too much time with you. It's not safe—not a good idea for me to linger, but I can't bear the thought of leaving you so mad at me. Would it set things right between us if I bought you one last drink before I left?"

I was still pretty miffed, but I had to smile. "Another drink *always* sets things right."

By the time he had fetched me a fresh boilermaker, I'd decided to give the boy a break. It was a mug's game, life, and how could I blame him for trying to get something for nothing? I did it all the time. As soon as he set my drink down on the table, I grabbed it with one hand and his forearm with the other. "You're not joining me?"

He shook his head. "I have to go. It's my first time—"

"Do tell."

"—and they'll be checking up on me. I shouldn't be anywhere near you when—" "There you are, Hezekiah!"

I scarcely had time to whisper, "Your name's *Hezekiah*?" to my escort before a brawny, silver-haired man swept down on our table and began pounding my new acquaintance heartily on the back.

"And is this lovely little lady your choice?" the older man boomed. "Well done, boy, well done! You'd be surprised how many first-timers pick a lass for all the wrong reasons. Ah, I blame this harsh modern world, teaching you boys to value shimmer over substance. If I had a nickel for every scrawny little peroxide blond we've had to give—" He paused and looked at me closely, then smiled. It was the same chinless, ear-to-ear grin my sailor sported, only this man had normal teeth. "Blast, where are my manners? It's a pleasure to meet you, miss—miss—?"

"Timothea Smoot," I said, lying happily. For some reason, this hail-fellow-well-met chump reminded me much too much of the showbiz types I'd known on the voyage to New York. Why waste the truth on someone who, odds were, wasn't going to waste it on you?

He touched the brim of his cap. "Captain Malachi Whately, at your service, Miss Smoot." His gaze drifted over the table, glittering with the collection of empty glasses from Hezekiah's recent hospitality, as well as my still-untouched boilermaker. I noticed a momentary frown of disapproval cross his face and remembered what my sailor boy had told me about how strict his captain was when it came to protecting the morals of his crew.

"Tsk. Would you look at that?" I said as primly as possible. "What a dreadfully untidy place this is, to be sure. You must understand, I was passing through this vile neighborhood solely because I was on my way to give piano lessons to orphans. And then, without warning, I was seized with an absolutely incapacitating fit of coughing. This young man came to my rescue and brought me into this wretched place solely to obtain a glass of water and ease my distress. This mess was here when we came in, as well as the gang of ruffians who made it. Oh, Captain, you have no idea what foul language they used, and how heavily they drank!" I rolled my eyes to emphasize how shocked—shocked, do you hear?—I was to find myself in such proximity to alcoholic beverages. I also turned my head aside, in hopes that Captain Whately wouldn't smell the beer and whiskey on my breath.

"Well, little lady, I'd expect no less from Hezekiah." The captain winked at my sailor. "A girl of your breeding and refinement is safe as houses with him." Turning to Hezekiah, he added, "It's past time we were on our way, lad. I'm proud of you, I am, for your having found—helped Miss Smoot. She's quite the surprise, she is, and *very* different from the usual run of women your shipmates bring home."

"She is different!" Hezekiah blurted. "She's not the one I want for—"

Captain Whately's hand shot out and closed tightly on Hezekiah's arm. He must have had a grip like a bear-trap, judging from the way the poor boy winced. I didn't think it was possible for him to go any paler, but he did.

"Now, lad, not another word," the captain said. His voice was jolly, but there was an odd, tense undertone to it as well, and an unnerving, penetrating look in his eyes, so black and beady it was like looking at a pair of oil-slick olives set in bread dough. "It's not mannerly to speak of a lady when you can speak to her." With his right hand still on Hezekiah's arm, he touched the brim of his cap with his left a second time and gave me another lip-stretching smile. "Miss Smoot, I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive us ill-bred sea dogs and permit us to escort you to your appointment."

"What appointment?" I asked, having forgot all about the poor, piano-lesson-deprived orphans.

Captain Whately didn't seem to notice my slip. He smiled on, and said: "Well, if you haven't got an appointment awaiting you, surely you must be going *somewhere* this fine evening. This isn't the sort of place where a lady of your obvious refinement would linger, now is it?" (Linger? No. Camp out most of the night, on the watch for paying customers? Yes.) "I hope you'll let Hezekiah and me see that you arrive where you're bound, all ship-shape and Bristol fashion."

"How considerate, how thoughtful, how very kind of you," I burbled, meanwhile racking my brain to come up with a good excuse to shake these would-be knights in tuna-scented armor. "I do wish I could say yes, but my landlady is quite vigilant. If she saw me come home in the company of strange men, I'd be ruined. I'll just be on my way—" On my way, out the door, and around the block to another one of my fishing holes. I stood up and took a step toward the door.

"At least allow us to do something to clear accounts for Hezekiah's rude ways," the captain said. "Let us buy you a drink."

That stopped me. "Oh, I couldn't," I said, for appearances' sake. I managed to sound truly regretful. (Easy enough to do, after one more glance at my latest, still-untouched boilermaker.)

The captain's beady eyes twinkled. "Not *that* sort of drink, miss. Nothing a refined young lady can't sip with propriety, I promise. I'll see if the barkeep can produce a cold ginger ale for you. I'd offer you something stronger—a glass of sherry, perhaps—but I'm sure you wouldn't—"

"Sherry would be swell," I said eagerly. And then, realizing that Miss Timothea Smoot wouldn't use such language or such enthusiasm over the possibility of another snootful, however lah-di-dah the drink, I hastily mended my ways: "I mean, Mother always said that sherry is a tonic."

The captain finally let go of Hezekiah's arm. "Won't be a minute, miss." He headed for the bar. No sooner was he away than my sailor boy grabbed me by the shoulders and whispered, "Get out of here. Get out *now*."

I slapped his hands aside and hissed back: "Not before I have one for the road."

"I'm not playing games with you, lass," he replied fiercely. "I daren't defy my captain openly, so take my warning *now*. You're too good a woman to suffer what'll happen if I let the old man go through with his plans. He means you dreadful harm."

"How? By getting me drunk and taking advantage of my innocence?" I snorted. "If that's what he's after, he'll probably spend more on sherry than if he'd just hand over my usual fee. But don't you fret, I'm not going to stay for more than one drink with the old sea dog."

"You're probably right," Hezekiah muttered, averting his gaze and stepping away from me just as Captain Whately returned with my drink.

I accepted the tiny glass from his hand with a murmur of thanks. Where in hell had the barkeep in *this* dive found such a dainty bit of bric-a-brac? That crystal thimble couldn't hold enough to give a mouse a buzz.

Oh, well.

"To your health, gentlemen." I raised the glass to my lips, intending to sip it demurely, but the dribble of amber liquid slipped down my throat in one swallow. It had been some time since I'd settled for sherry, so the taste was a pleasant surprise. I'd expected something mild—a mere whisper of alcohol—but instead I got a remarkably strong zing as the drink hit my belly, followed by a nice, warm, comfy feeling, and then—

And then, as my head began to tilt and my vision got jumpier than a frog on a griddle, and the pretty green and purple polka dots started dancing in front of my eyes just before the final fade, I realized something very important: Sherry was a lady's drink with a girl's name, and my little darling had a boyfriend hidden on the premises, a gent who went by the name of Mickey Finn.

I don't know how long I was off in slumberland thanks to Captain Whately's cocktail. Too long, that's all I know. Long enough for the old nightmares to come creeping back, jumbled and jerky as a badly threaded filmstrip, but very much there:

My best friend being decked out for her "wedding" led out past the titanic gates,

bound to the flower-wreathed posts as the men danced for our god. Her screams echoing through my skull were bad, but not as bad as the moment when they stopped dead.

The time of peace, bought with her life, and the unstoppable passage of the year returning to the season of sacrifice. My father's grim face, telling me that when the ceremony next took place, *I* would be the chosen "bride."

The desperate, ever-racing days of practicing with the little knife I stole from one of our warriors, learning to handle it deftly enough to serve my plan. The moment when the village drums began to beat, and the men danced, pounding their chests, miming our—*their* god, and the witch doctor's resounding voice outside our hut, declaring that it was time to bring the "bride" to the altar.

They never knew—the chief, the witch doctor, my father—how cleverly I'd secured my stolen knife to the inside of my wrist under the thick circlet of jungle blossoms that were part of my adornments. Maybe if they hadn't been in such a hurry to scamper back behind the gates the instant they lashed my hands to the pillars of sacrifice, they'd have caught wise. Maybe then they might've taken the time to tie my feet as well as my arms, and see to it that the ropes were *tight*.

Maybe they would've done all that if I hadn't let out a shriek of bone-shattering shrillness and started screaming that I'd felt the ground shake, heard the trees rustle, groan and snap with the approach of something big, wailing that I saw *him* coming for me now, now, NOW! They didn't pause to ask questions; they raced back through the gates so fast, I think the chief's feathered headdress caught fire.

Oh, practice *did* make perfect: The perfect sleight-of-hand that let me work that knife from under my flowery bracelet and into my grip, even with ropes around my wrists! From the safety of our village's towering walls, everyone thought they were watching just another virgin sacrifice waiting for the inevitable, thrashing and screaming to beat the band. I was thrashing, all right! Thrashing to cover up the awkward business of sawing through the first noose from the inside out. Once that was done, all it took was a swift slash to cut my other wrist loose, and then—?

Then it was twenty-three skidoo, that's all, folks, and so long, suckers! I was free and off the platform of sacrifice before the first stroke of the great summoning gong could be sounded. I dove into the jungle and never looked back.

I knew none of our warriors would follow me. The yellow-bellied creeps wouldn't dare. All those years, all those sacrifices, and did anyone ever say, "Hey, you know what? How about if instead of wasting all of these virgins, we maybe make us a fleet of canoes, set sail, and the last guy left on shore torches the whole place? I mean, honestly, why do we stay here, up to our armpits in monsters? Maybe our spears and arrows can't kill them, but I haven't met the living thing that was fireproof. C'mon, it's worth a try. If it works, after things cool down we'll come back to a monster-free home and the world's biggest barbecue. If it doesn't, we keep paddling. There's got to be other islands out there. All that driftwood and junk down on the beach didn't just drop out from under a pterodactyl's *ptushie*. It had to come from elsewhere. So whaddaya say, show of hands, all in favor of a life without monsters?"

A life without monsters . . . That wasn't in the cards for me, not in that jungle, not on that island. The place was lousy with prehistoric horrors, but with my hard-won freedom, at least I wasn't going to be a sitting duck if I did run into them. Lucky thing that the odds slanted a little in my favor. I was small and I could be very easy to overlook, when I put my mind to it. The jungle was big, and it offered plenty of hiding places. As long as I could find things to eat without running into things that would eat *me*, my immediate future looked okay. I felt bad for whichever of my childhood playmates was going to be tapped to take my place on the altar, but that's horse races.

I don't know how long I could've gone on living like that. Good thing that ship full

of crazy white men showed up so I never had to find out. My dream memories shifted to the face of the stoker who'd liked what I had to offer and stowed me away as his temporary bride. He was a big ape, but better than the real thing. (Who, by the way, filled the ship's hull with roars when he was awake and snores when he wasn't.)

The stoker's leering mug began to melt like wax in a frying pan, spreading out until it re-formed into a colossal face, dark, dangerous, inhuman, and locked up behind steel bars. In my drugged vision, once again I peered into his cage the way I'd done the day before we docked in New York. He was quiet, for once. At first I thought he was asleep, but then he opened one of those big, runny, red-rimmed eyes and gave me a look that came close to breaking my heart.

Close, until I thought of all the girls my tribe had offered to him. And for what? A full-grown human being wasn't even a mouthful to him. He could have ignored the sacrifice, but no; he had to be a pig. Now there he lay, betrayed by his own appetites, punished for taking his greed just one scrawny, white-skinned step too far.

I leaned my face against the bars. "Told you blonds were trouble," I said.

"Told me what?"

The voice in my ear was a cool blast of briny air that blew away my fading dreams. I blinked off the last wisps and saw Hezekiah's anxious face, lit by the full moon and framed by the vast expanse of open ocean behind him. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get out a single word, I felt cold water rush over my feet and halfway up my shins. Splashes of spray struck my skirt, already plastered damply to my legs. Without stopping to think, I tried to pull the wet cloth away from my skin, and got a big surprise: I couldn't. My right hand was tied to a gleaming white stone pillar and Hezekiah was busy giving my left the same treatment.

"Not again," I muttered.

"Huh?" Hezekiah paused in his task.

I tapped the right-hand pillar with one fingertip. "Sacrificial altar, right? Seen one, seen 'em all."

"I tried to warn you," Hezekiah said, his voice thick with sorrow. "It was my turn to find the sacrifice, but once I got to know you, I didn't want this to be your fate. Please, *please* forgive me."

He sounded sincere, and I believed him. At this point, why would he need to lie? "It's okay," I said. "You're right, I should've listened to you. No hard feelings." (Not for long, anyway.) I cocked my head. The breeze brought the sound of many voices raised in a weird invocation, a yowl in the key of gibberish. "The choir, right? My folks stuck to drums and dancing."

"You—your people worshipped the Great Old Ones, too?"

"Just the Hairy Big One." Hezekiah's reaction was priceless, but I wasn't in the

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mood to enjoy it. "So this is why you were cozying up to me, huh? At least my tribe didn't go raiding the neighbors for god-fodder. We only used local talent."

"We—we can't." For a sailor, Hezekiah was taking an awfully long time getting a few decent knots tied. "Most of our Innsmouth girls aren't—aren't fit for this honor."

"Look, if your god's on a virgins-only diet, I thought I made it perfectly clear that I'm not—"

"Diet?" Hezekiah's eyes bugged out even more than usual. "You mean your god *ate* the sacrifices?"

"Well, the official title they gave us was 'bride,' but I don't think every honeymoon ends with only one survivor. Of course, I've heard some rumors about how they do things in New Jersey, but—" I raised my eyebrows. "Your god *doesn't*?"

"Er, no." My poor sailor boy sounded even more embarrassed than when he'd learned about my profession. "Our girls—our girls really *are* his brides. It's how we've done it for generations. That's why we have to—to look farther afield for offerings. Some unbelievers may dare to call our dread lord C'thulhu a blasphemous abomination from beyond the stars, but he'd *never* marry a blood relative."

"So what he does is—?" Hezekiah nodded. "And tonight I'm the one he's going to—?" Hezekiah nodded again, looking miserable. "What happens after he's—?"

"He goes back to sleep."

"That figures. But what happens to *me*?"

"You will remain in Innsmouth, honored and maintained in a manner worthy of dread C'thulhu's accepted bride. Oh, Miss Smoot, I am so sorry you must endure this! I really am fond of you, and I do regret with all my heart that I've brought you to—"

"—a secure life where I'll be taken care of and never have to worry about where my next meal's coming from?" I laughed. "Sweetheart, if I'd known the details, I'd've given *myself* that Mickey Finn. I could kiss you. Maybe I will, once the honeymoon's over. Maybe more, if your dread lord whatzisname is a really sound sleeper."

"You're—you're not mad at me, Miss Smoot?"

"Not mad, not Smoot. But we can trade real names later. Now ship out, sailor boy; I'm a professional and I've got a job to do."

He looked doubtful, but he finally finished tying my left hand to its stone post and left me. I heard him sloshing through the shallows, back to the shore. The caterwauling congregation got louder and more frenzied. The silvered ocean began to churn and swell, ripples rising to become whitecaps, whitecaps turning into combers, until one huge surge of sea lifted itself to untold heights and for a moment, I was scared that all Hezekiah's yammer about gods and bridal sacrifices was just a big lie to comfort me right before I drowned. I held my breath, waiting for the great wave to break over me.

It never did. Instead of acting like a normal curler, it split down the middle and ran off to either side, revealing a monster than could have given my old nightmares a run for the money. Bat-winged and taloned, with what looked like an octopus bouquet for a mouth, the creature reared out of the depths and strode toward me with eldritch lust in his fiery eyes.

Eh. I'd seen worse.

And I'd done worse, in my day, to survive. If all those girls from old Captain Whately's burg could handle this C'thulhu chump, so could I. It wasn't like this was my first time as a "bride." The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I'd be living on Easy Street, and the sooner I could see what happened when two people with buzz-saw bites tried kissing.

I *like* a challenge. Matter of fact, I kind of liked the challenge wading toward me right now. I gave him my most winning smile and spoke the words I'd been waiting all those years to say: "C'mere, ya big ape."

Like I said, I'm entitled to a few laughs. O



## Seeking Out Lobe-finned Truths

First move along the rough African coast  
Where lava leaks like ink into the shallows

Sleep among the Comoro huts  
Learn to hollow out an outrigger

Coil hundreds of meters of hand line  
Gather flat-sided stones for sinkers

Set off at night with a single lamp  
To guide you across a pthalo-blue sea

Bait your hook with candy & let her plunge  
Down fast & yank to release the stones

Your line drifts where the Forbidden One drifts  
Where you drift as well

For though they called it the living fossil in 1938  
Today you discover that the ultraconservative

Stretches of your genome the most unchanged  
Sequences of nucleotides in your own DNA

Match most closely to that of the coelacanth  
So distant a relative measured in geologic terms

Still kissing cousins in evolutionary time

—Robert Frazier

Since Jack Skillingstead's last appearance in Asimov's, his novel, *Harbinger*, and collection, *Are You There and Other Stories*, have been published and he's recently completed a second novel. All this activity may explain his paltry short story production. In July, he will be a guest speaker at Walter Jon Williams's Taos Toolbox. We're glad he found time in his hectic schedule to write this far future tale about a caretaker whose desperate attempt to protect humanity may actually condemn it unless he can learn how to go with . . .

# THE FLOW AND DREAM

Jack Skillingstead

**H**e inhabited a timeless flow and dream. The flow was part of the Undertower's machine mind, endless surging data, meaningless to him. The dataflow buoyed him but he dwelt mostly in dream, where the others hadn't died. In dream, Sten hadn't brought the alien virus back through the interlock. In dream, Celia touched him and their voices murmured in the close darkness. In dream, his daughter Kayla laughed.

Occasionally, open sky and light-drenched vistas intruded—non sequiturs. He pushed the vistas aside and clung to the close murmuring dark.

Then it all stopped.

Braincore needles, catheters, muscle-stimulating cuffs, esophageal tube, transdermal sensors, retinal pulsers—all withdrew and fell away with a final whir, click, and suspiration.

He lay stunned in the gel-couch.

After a few moments of real time, he opened gummy eyelids. A dim amber rectangle created as much gloom as it dispelled. Above the ceiling, an air-handler labored in counterpoint to his rasping breaths. Encircled by dark projectors and withdrawn meldpoints, bereft of the flow and dream, the man groaned in dense torpor. He reached for a meldpoint—and stopped when he saw his hand: wrinkled and puckered, bulging with knuckles, corded with thick blue veins. He held the hand in front of his face, turned it slowly. "God."

With effort, he sat up. The gel-couch tilted forward, obeying his movement, folding itself into a chair. For a long while that's all the man could accomplish. But eventually he stood, knees grinding painfully, as if spun glass wound through the dry bones; lost in the flow and dream, he had become old.

His memory was ragged, blown through with holes. But he did recall his first dangerously extended meld. It occurred weeks after the deaths of his family and fellow Monitors and their children. His daughter had survived the longest. But in the end,

she had gone like the others, staring uncomprehendingly into a dark the man could not see, her eyes watery blue coins in her fevered face. He incinerated her body, along with the others, and then he went on, alone.

Far below the Monitor's quarters, Sleepers stacked in the deep lockers waited for the next generation of Monitors to revive them, when the planet became habitable. But now there would be no further generations. And so he rode the flow and dream, and craved it unbearably when he withdrew from it, until, finally, he ceased withdrawing from it at all.

Except now, when forcibly expelled.

He hobbled around the living quarters, inventoried the storage bins of comestibles, tested the potable water. He established a routine that at least approximated life, taking food and drink as needed, eliminating his waste, exercising. All this, while the dead feeling cloaked him. The dead feeling had been waiting for him while he dreamed. As his strength and ability to concentrate slowly returned, he attempted to restore the melding apparatus. But it was as if the Undertower, which had been Ship, had lapsed into coma. All but the most vital life-sustaining systems were inactive. Nothing the man attempted succeeded in revitalizing them. Without functioning surface telemetry, he could not monitor progress of the terraforming machines. Without the lift, descending to the deep chambers was too daunting a prospect. Besides, he felt nothing for the legions of sleeping colonists. All he wanted was the flow and dream and the cessation of his thoughts—all he wanted was to escape the dead feeling of grief.

He wondered, Would real death be like an eternal meld, or like the dark cell of his approximate life? Rocked back in the useless gel-couch, he stared at the dim light panel above him and wondered how long he could wait to find out.

He was tearing open a packet containing a protein bar when he heard echoing footfalls ascending from below. He dropped the packet and turned toward the door to the stairwell. Someone was coming up—coming up from the deep.

But there were only Sleepers down there.

He approached the door, hesitated, trembled his fingers over the burnished metal, then gripped the latching mechanism, cranked it over, and wheeled the door aside.

The slightly fresher air in the vast stairwell breathed into his face. The old man inhaled sharply and coughed. Below him, in amber gloom, a bright bar of light appeared, swept up and fell upon him. He squinted, holding his hand up, palm turned out.

"We've come for you," a girl's voice said from behind the too-bright light.

The old man squinted and moved his head, trying to see her. He cleared his throat. "I'm a Monitor," he said, in a cracked voice. "Who are you?"

The girl swung the light off his face. She came up a flight of stairs, feet slapping on metal, and paused again, only one flight below him. "We know you," she said.

He regarded her, a girl no more than twelve, hair growing out in short bristles, a backpack strapped to her shoulders. Where were the others, the "we"? "Who—?" he said, groping either for her name or his own, which had been swallowed down one of the holes in his mind—sinks created by extended melding.

She came the remainder of the way up, taking the last few steps three and four at a time, pumping her legs, knees practically to her chin, fairly *leaping* up the stairs. This, after ascending from the deep chambers, kilometers below. "We're Almeta," she said, thrusting out her hand. "And we're going to the surface. Your name is Bale, and you have to come with us."

*Bale.* The name was his; he remembered it instantly. He looked at her proffered hand. "The surface—"

"Yes."

"But you can't do that."

"We are doing it." She grabbed his hand, shook it vigorously. Her skin was hot, damp with sweat. "Come with us," she said. "You have to. Now."

He pulled his hand free of hers, suddenly frightened. "You have the virus."

She stared at him, evaluated him like a diagnostic robot—the way her head moved in little stuttering jerks. "There is no virus," she said. "You successfully eradicated it decades ago."

"How could you possibly know that?" It was Bale's turn to evaluate *her*. She both was and wasn't a child. "What are you?"

"We must go now."

"There's no point. The surface is—"

"The world is habitable."

"You can't know that. I'm a Monitor and even I don't know it."

"It's true," Almeta said.

"Because you want it to be true doesn't mean that it is."

"Come," she said.

"How are you awake?" Bale reached out and touched her chin, turning her head a little, leaning to see the bio-ports, as if it were possible she *wasn't* a Sleeper. The ports were there, of course. Some violent scoring blackened her cranial plate. The skin around the plate was shiny with recent scarring. The Sleepers dreamed in a far deeper meld than Bale had achieved, their pods designed to hold them for generations of time, the meld allowing vital dream function to continue even as their bodies remained in stasis. Bale's melding apparatus was not intended for such long-term use; its function was strictly restorative. He had abused the apparatus and paid the price: lost years and addictive longing for the flow and dream.

"The child was sleeping," Almeta said, lifting her chin away from his fingers. "Like the others. Ship chose her because of her youth and vitality."

As an original colonist in stasis, Almeta was easily a hundred years older than Bale. The bristly hair covering her head indicated the days since she had awakened. Absently, Bale touched the needle ports on the top of his own head, picked at the damp crust that continually formed since the needles withdrew. "Ship chose?" he said.

"You must come with us to the surface, to complete the mission."

Bale frowned. "Virus or not, you have a fever." He looked over his shoulder at the open door to his quarters. A piece of him wished he hadn't left them to encounter this strange girl. He had been preparing to end his isolation permanently. "I suppose you better stay with me for now," he said. As he started to turn away, the girl said, "We will go alone if we have to."

He paused. "I can't stop you. But you're wasting your time. The interlock will only open for a Monitor."

"It will open." She started climbing stairs, hitting the next landing before Bale could find his voice again. She moved so *fast*. In moments she would be gone. He shook off his enervation and shouted, "Wait!" She stopped and looked down at him. "Please wait," he said. His breathing was ragged with the fear of being left alone. "I must pack food and water. It's still a long way to the hatches. And I can't run up those stairs like you."

"We will wait for you, Bale."

Almeta slowed down, but nevertheless set a steady upward pace that Bale could not match. Soon she was half a dozen flights above him, her flashlight flickering distantly in the high gloom of the Undertower.

Bale halted and leaned against the bulkhead, chest heaving, knees on fire. He sat down and wiped sweat from his eyes.

"Hey!" Almeta came bounding down the stairs, making a racket of echoes. Bale lifted his head. She reached him in seconds.

"What are you sitting there for?" she said. Her speech vacillated between a child's loose diction and the elocutions of some . . . *other* voice.

"Resting," Bale said.

"Oh, okay. We will wait while you rest."

"Thanks."

She didn't sit, didn't even stop moving. She paced the landing above him, looking up, like a caged thing under open sky.

"Why aren't you tired?" Bale said. "Where do you get this energy?"

"We are new. Young."

"I know. But—never mind. In any case, I'm *not* young."

She interrupted her pacing and lowered her gaze to him. "You're not as old as you behave," she said.

"Look at me!"

"You're seventy-six in Terran years. The average human life span is one hundred and five."

Bale said, "How do know my age?"

"We know everything," Almeta said, voice shifting again. "We are Ship."

"I don't understand." Ship had crossed the interstellar gulf. Upon planetfall, after the establishment of the terraformers, Ship had burrowed beneath the surface, to wait as Undertower. A thinking mechanism, Ship was more than machine, less than being. But Ship was not a human child.

"Are you sufficiently rested to proceed?" Almeta asked. "We are used to knowing all. When you melded there were no barriers."

Bale stood up. "Explain."

"We are Ship. We are the child. We are Undertower."

"Come down here," Bale said.

Almeta resumed pacing. "I don't want to. We're supposed to be going *up*, not down."

"Just come down here." He was talking to the child now.

Almeta came down, practically falling, skipping more steps than she touched. When she reached him, Bale put his hand on her shoulder to hold her still. He turned his flashlight on her face, which was streaming sweat, and practically glowing with fever. He placed his finger over the large artery in her neck. "My God, your heart—"

She pushed away from him. "We need to go now."

He pointed the light at her eyes. The pupils did not contract. He almost dropped the light. "What's happening to you?"

"Child and Ship are together," the *other* voice said. And then the child: "We're mixed up now." And the *other*: "Half the Sleepers are deceased. The deep has become a tomb. You did not fulfill your function, Bale. Mission goal should be paramount. The new collective purpose of the Sleepers superseded the mission."

"What purpose?"

"To meld forever."

"You're killing me," Bale said. He paused after another hour of steady climbing, leaned against the bulkhead, panting, sweat dripping, legs trembling. Almeta had waited for him this time.

"No, we're saving you," Almeta said.

"Thanks."

"Sarcasm. I get it."

That was the child. He raised his head, wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He shined his light on Almeta and didn't like what he saw. "You're burning out the girl's body."

Almeta pushed the light aside. "It can't be helped." She started to turn to the next flight of stairs. He grabbed her arm.

"Wait," he said, "at least eat something."

The girl, still turned away from him, gazed up the well of stairs. He tugged on her arm. "Sit down. Eat. *Now*. There's no point in killing yourself." He put his hands on her shoulders (a somatic memory of his daughter, Kayla, communicated with a buried part of his wounded heart), and pushed her firmly down. At first she resisted. Then she bent her knees and lowered herself until she was sitting on the stair tread.

"We will die, Bale," she said. "We have already sacrificed Ship to be together with the child. Only the mission is imperishable."

"Shut up," Bale said. He unshouldered his backpack, opened it, and pulled out a couple of protein bars, a pack of salt tablets, and two bottles of water. Almeta watched him with unblinking eyes. He divided the meal and sat beside her. "Eat, drink, and be merry," he said.

"I don't understand."

"Old-World phrase. Never mind. Just get some food in you. Your body has to have fuel to function. You should be able to understand that."

Almeta lowered her chin and tore into the sealed packet containing the protein bar. She ate the bar mechanically, as if she were chewing cardboard, popped the salt tablets in her mouth, and washed them down with water. Bale drank from his own bottle. The water tasted dusty. Almeta chugged her water then dropped the empty bottle on the landing and stood up. "Let's go," she said.

"Slave driver."

She looked at him.

"Never mind, never mind." His legs still felt wobbly. He wanted to delay as long as possible. He made a face at the protein bar and pushed the last bite into his mouth. Really, it *did* taste like cardboard. "What have you got in here?" he said, giving Almeta's backpack a shake. It felt light.

"Nothing."

He slipped his thumbnail along the static seal and opened the top flap. Empty. "The girl wanted it," Almeta said. "It was a familiar thing."

A comfort item, Bale thought. Children needed familiar things. "It was a long climb in the dark, wasn't it?" He patted Almeta's shoulder in a tender way.

She shrugged. "Let's go."

She was waiting for him when he finally reached the sealed hatches. "They will open for you," she said. He glanced at the interlock. Long ago, Sten had gone on a recon and unknowingly brought the virus back with him. The sterilizing beams had done nothing. Diagnostics hadn't even detected its presence.

"They won't open," Bale said.

"You inhabited the meld a very long time," Almeta said. "We sent you the truth of the world in dreams but you ignored them. Now you must complete the mission of human habitation. You don't even know what generation this is."

"Of course I do."

"This is third generation."

"That's impossible."

"Mission goal," Almeta said, "is to establish human habitation of the transformed surface. You are the only viable human left on Ship."

"You said there were others, in stasis."

"A few remain, but their survival is questionable. You are viable. Mission protocols require human habitation of the transformed surface."

"One man can't colonize a world."

"It's time to go out," Almeta said. "Go out now."

"I can't. After Sten brought back the virus, I recalibrated the safety filters. The hatches won't open, even for me, as long as the virus exists as a threat in the atmosphere. I told you climbing up here was a waste of time."

Almeta shook her head. She was starting to wilt. Her breathing had grown shallow. "This is third generation after planetfall. The terraformers long ago scrubbed the atmosphere clean."

He stared at her. "Without telemetry I can't be sure of that."

Almeta started to speak, then collapsed. Bale caught her. "Please open the hatches," she said, and it was the child, pleading. "I want to see the sky, the way it was in my dream." Bale eased her down to the floor, cradled her head in his big hand.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Please—" In a fading voice. Almeta's eyes were drowsy. Bale felt the heat against his hand, just as he had felt it when he cradled his daughter's head on her deathbed: so much heat, burning out the child's brain.

"For God's sake," he said, addressing Ship. "Can't you let her go?"

"The sky . . ." Almeta said.

Bale carefully let her head down on the floor and stood. His body was aching after the long climb. "It won't work," he mumbled. Was it that he *preferred* it not work? Was he that afraid of living? He glanced back at the child, then, angrily, he slapped his hand spread-fingered on the sensor pad. Immediately the pad lit up, the interlock began to grind, and after a brief lag the complicated puzzle arrangement snapped open, slipped aside, unwound, and withdrew. Directly above them the ceiling parted. Wind roared through the hatch. Brilliant daylight drenched them.

Bale fell back, threw his arms up, nearly blinded.

Almeta gazed unblinkingly into the light, and Bale knew it was Ship lying incapacitated on the floor.

The wind was like a crystalline freshet—cold air flushing out the stale, heated atmosphere of the Undertower. Bale shaded his hand over his narrowed, stinging eyes. The sky was pale and pink. Clouds like yellow gauze drifted by.

"Mission goal," Ship said, "is to establish human habitation of the transformed surface." Bale looked down in time to see the girl's eyes close and her body, without moving, subside toward death. His heart clenched in a memory of grief. He knelt beside her and took her hand into his. Her lips moved. He leaned closer. "I want my mother," Almeta said. The heat of intense fever radiated from her face.

Something green with featherless wings, like a kind of bat, beat through the open hatches, caught by the inflow of wind. Startled, Bale looked away from the girl. The bat-thing knocked against a metal strut and fell stunned to the floor, wings twitching. When Bale turned back to the girl, she was dead.

Bale picked up the New-World creature in his cupped hands. With wings folded it was no larger than a starling. Its head was long and narrow, ending in a hooked beak. He could feel it breathing, perhaps too frightened to move. The wind had finally abated, now plucking at Bale's tunic like a fussy companion about to send him on his way. Suddenly the creature hooked its beak into Bale's thumb. His hands sprang apart, and the creature flew away through the open hatch.

Bale examined the wound. A bead of bright, living blood seeped forth, and he smeared it away.

It was a long while before he could bring himself to do the next things, but eventually he did them. He sealed the interlock, to protect the child's body. And then he began the long descent to the deep lockers and whatever life remained for him to revive. ○

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is having a busy year. Her next Retrieval Artist novel, *Talia's Revenge*, will appear in the spring from Roc. The latest novel in her Diving Into The Wreck universe, *City of Ruins*, will appear in May from Pyr. Her paranormal romance, *Wickedly Charming*, will also appear in May, under her pen name Kristine Grayson. And WMG Publishing is putting her entire backlist—including short fiction—into e-book format. Although the situation for the characters in Kris's new story are dire, the author might just appreciate a moment when she, too, could be . . .

# BECALMED

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Here's what they tell you when you want to leave the Fleet:

Stay behind. Don't get back on the ship, not even to retrieve your things. Have someone bring the important items to you.

Check to see if any of your friends or any members of your family want to leave as well. Don't force them. For most of us, the ship is and has always been home. Life on a planet—any planet—is different. Very different. So different that some can't handle it, even if they think they can.

Don't go to a base. Don't ask to be dropped off. Stay. Create a new life with the grateful people you've saved/helped/rescued. Become someone else.

They tell us these things before each mission and then again as one is ending. They tell us these things so that we can make the right choice for us, the right choice for the ship. The right choice for everyone.

They do this because they used to forbid us from leaving. We were of the ship, they'd say. We were part of the Fleet. We were specially chosen, specially bred.

We were, they said, able to overcome anything.

But that wasn't true. Even with ships built for five hundred people, there is no room for one slowly devolving intellect, one emotionally unstable but highly trained individual. No room for the crazy, the sick, or the absolutely terrified.

The key, however, is finding that person. Figuring out who she is. And what to do about her.

It had been a slaughter. Twenty-seven of us, and only three survived.

I am one of the survivors. And that is all I know.

I sit on the window seat in my living area, staring out the portal. I had asked, back when I got promoted the very first time, to have an apartment on the outer edges of the ship. I'd been told apartments that brushed against the exterior were dangerous, that if the ship sustained serious damage I could lose everything.

But I like looking out the portal—a real portal, not a wall screen, not some kind of entertainment—at space as it is at this moment. But I do not look into space.

Instead, I have activated a small section of my wall screen. I read and reread the regulations. I translate them into different languages. I have the ship's computer recite them to me. I have the children's school programs explain them.

The upshot is the same: I should leave. I should never have come back to the ship. That was my mistake.

Theirs was to keep me and not ask me to remain planetside.

These errors make me nervous. They make me wonder what will happen next, and that is unusual. The ship thrives on structure. Structure comes from following a schedule, following the rules, following long established traditions. Tradition dictates an announcement to the entire crew at the beginning and end of each mission: the always familiar, easily quotable regulations about disembarking at the next stop, about leaving if you can no longer perform your duties.

We should have gotten that announcement as soon as the *anacapa* drive delivered us to this fold in space. We have been here too long. Even I know that.

Each ship in the Fleet has an *anacapa* drive. The drive also works as a cloak, although my former husband objects to that term. If the *Ivoire* is under attack, the captain activates the *anacapa* drive, which moves us into foldspace. We stay in foldspace only a moment, then return to our original position seconds or hours later, depending on the manner in which the navigators programmed the *anacapa*. Sometimes, in a battle, seconds are all you need. The enemy ship moves; we do not. We vanish for a moment. Then we reappear, behind them.

Or we don't reappear for hours, and they think us long gone. Either way, we are only in foldspace for a moment.

We have been in this foldspace for days.

I bring my feet onto the window seat, press my thighs against my breasts, and rest my head on my knees.

No one will tell me anything. I am shaky and emotional, unable to remember. Unable to think clearly about anything. And for a woman who has spent her entire life thinking, this change terrifies me most of all.

After four Ship Days, they open my apartment door.

They don't knock. They override the locks—locks I've programmed in my paranoia.

I don't recognize them, although I recognize their gold uniforms.

Medical Evaluation Unit: Psychological and Emotional Stress Department.

How many people have I sent to them over the years? How smug have I felt when the medics in the gold uniforms take troublesome workers from my linguistic unit?

Now they've come for me—four Ship Days after we entered this foldspace, ten Ship Days after I was medivacked from our makeshift headquarters on *Ukhanda*, nine Ship Days after they asked what the *Quurzod* had done and I answered, "To my knowledge, nothing at all."

To my knowledge. Which is terrifyingly incomplete.

Two men and a woman stand in my doorway. I don't recognize any of them. Clearly, they were never on the teams that took workers from my section.

The woman is the spokesman. She introduces herself. The name washes over me even though I try to catch it, hang onto it, remember it.

Her spiel isn't what I expect. I expected the standard: *You have the right to refuse treatment. You have the right to remain in your apartment until we reach planetside. You have the right to your own medical professional.*

Instead, she says, "You are about to undergo a battery of psychological tests. Some will prove exceedingly difficult and/or uncomfortable. Some are designed to retrieve memories you—or something around you—have blocked. These tests will provide us

with the truth as you understand it. They will also show if you still retain what is commonly known as your sanity. Do you understand?"

Oh, I understand. I should be relieved by this, but I am not. I swallow uncontrollably. I am shaking.

What I want to say, what I'm trying not to say, is that I don't want to remember. I don't want to know. Just charge me and be done with it.

Take me back to Ukhanda and leave me there, like you were supposed to. Forget I even exist.

"Do you understand?" she asks again.

One of the men stares at me, as if he's trying to figure out whether or not I can speak. I can speak in fifteen languages and twenty-three different dialects. I can understand sixty languages, albeit some imperfectly.

I can speak. And I do understand. I just don't want to admit it.

She starts, "Do you—"

"Yes," I say, thinking that will end her spiel.

But it doesn't.

"You will want an advocate," she says. "That can be a friend, a family member, or a professional. We can provide you with a list of professional advocates or you can contact one on your own."

I dry swallow again. An advocate? I'd heard this in legal matters, but not in psychological ones. What did I do on Ukhanda? Do I know? Do they?

"Am I in serious trouble?" I ask.

For a moment, the woman's eyes soften. I sense compassion. But then, I might be searching for it.

Or seeing it where it does not exist.

"Yes," she says.

"Could it damage my family?" I ask.

"Yes," she says.

I have left my family out of this so far. I haven't contacted them since my return. Nor have I allowed any of them to contact me, although they've tried. I have shut them out, changed the contact codes, refused to acknowledge them when they've been outside my door.

Now I feel a bit of comfort—what I had seen as selfish behavior will benefit them after all.

"I'm not going with you until I have an advocate," I say.

"Good choice," she says, and waits while I contact the best advocate we have.

I have never met my advocate before, but I have followed her work for nearly a decade. Legal matters onboard ship are often petty, but they provide real-time entertainment of a kind that most fictions can't. And when the legal matters spill into the Fleet, then the entertainment ratchets up.

Leona Shearing has handled some of the biggest intraFleet controversies, but she keeps her hand in on the smaller cases—mostly, she tells me when she arrives at my apartment, because she likes to remain busy. IntraFleet controversies happen only rarely. Smaller, shipboard cases occur every day.

She acts as if I'm a smaller shipboard case. I don't disabuse her of this notion, although she is surprised that three medical personnel have come to take me away, not the usual two.

She is a flamboyant woman who wears her hair down. She prefers flowing garments, unusual clothing in the Fleet, where most every department has its own uniform and the uniforms differ only by color. She does not work for the Fleet. She runs her own business. All the advocates have their own businesses, as do some of the tu-

tors scattered across the ships. Specialists on the *Sante* often work privately as well, and so do many of the restaurateurs on the *Brazza*.

Still, working for someone other than the Fleet is unusual, and risky. Many do not acknowledge their difference, wearing clothing that suggests a uniform. Leona Shearing accentuates her difference with her clothing and her hair. Her manner, however, is strictly professional.

She interviews me briefly—asking my name, my rank, my position, as if she's checking to see if I am of sound mind. Then she turns to the three medical personnel, who have not left the room, and asks them why they didn't just send for me.

"She needs to be escorted," the woman says.

"You only need two people for that," Leona says.

"One stays. We have occasion to search the apartment."

She frowns, then narrows her eyes as she looks at me. "Did you let them in here?"

"No," I say. "They overrode the codes."

She stands. "You need to tell me what she's being accused of."

"She ran a team of twenty-seven to study the Quurzod," the woman says. "Only three returned."

"I assume she's one of the three who returned," Leona says.

"Yes," the woman says.

"The twenty-four are dead?" Leona asks.

"We believe so," the woman says.

"You don't know?" Leona asks.

"We have not verified the deaths," the woman says.

Something whispers across my brain, too fast for me to catch it.

"Are the other two survivors being investigated?" Leona says.

"No," the woman says.

"Why not?" Leona asks.

The woman looks at me. "She's the only one who broke away from the group."

My stomach clenches. I have to will my hands not to form fists. I lean against the portal, unable to look at the strangeness of space.

"So?" Leona says.

"So she's the only one we found covered in blood," the woman says.

I bite my lower lip. Technically, they didn't find me. Technically, I staggered into a nearby village, and the villagers contacted the ship.

Technically, I found them.

"I still don't see the issue," Leona asks. "I'm sure you tested the blood. From your tone and her appearance, I'm gathering that it wasn't all hers."

"None of it was hers," the woman says.

I glance at Leona. I expect her to look at me, then get up and nod toward me regretfully, to tell me that I no longer deserve her services. But she doesn't look in my direction at all.

Instead, she says to the woman, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't we at war with the Quurzod?"

"We weren't then," the woman says.

"We weren't friendly," Leona says. "We were there at the request of the Xenth, to investigate claims of genocide, were we not?"

The woman stiffens. So do I. I don't remember genocide. I don't remember going planetside.

I don't remember anything except the heat, the dry air. The stench of drying blood.

"We weren't at war yet," the woman says primly.

"We were in unfriendly territory, trying to change the balance of power," Leona says. "That's as close as you can get without declaring hostilities."

The woman's mouth thins. The men haven't moved. It's as if the conversation is going on in another room.

I try not to look at them. I try not to look at any of them.

"I am not a politician," the woman says. "I'm not sure at what stage a war becomes a war."

"Perhaps at the first sign of bloodshed," Leona says.

"I think that's too simplistic," the woman says.

"I thought you weren't a politician," Leona says.

They stare at each other. My heart pounds. I'm not sure what my advocate is playing at.

The woman takes a deep breath. "They say she caused the deaths."

"Who says?" Leona asks, and I hear a new note in her voice. Triumph? Had she been fishing for information? Was that why she goaded the medics?

"The other two," the woman says.

"The other two," Leona says. "Who weren't covered in blood."

"Yes," the woman says.

"Who didn't stagger out of the desert alone, dehydrated, and nearly dead," Leona says.

Was I nearly dead? I don't remember that. I just remember how the heat served up mirages like water, how the air had so much dust it seemed like a live thing, how my skin burned to the touch.

"What were they doing while their colleagues were dying?" Leona says.

The woman gets that prim look again. "I don't know," she says. "You'll have to ask them."

She's lying. She knows.

My stomach is a hard knot. I rest one hand against it, hoping to soothe it.

"If you suspect her of a heinous crime," Leona says, "why did you let her back on ship?"

"She has the captain's protection," the woman says.

I wince. I didn't ask for that. He shouldn't be involved.

"The captain can't protect her," Leona says. "He should know that. If she's done something wrong, she gets punished—planetside."

"We're at war," the woman says. "We couldn't keep our people planetside."

"Then we leave her and bring the innocents back," Leona says.

I close my eyes. She's right. That's what the regulations say. I shouldn't be here.

"The captain can't change the regulations," Leona says. She's clearly pushing something, but what I don't know.

"Actually," the woman says, "that's a gray area. We have two policies, the modern and the ancient. Both apply in this case."

Leona frowns. She doesn't agree. Isn't it her business to know the regulations? Isn't she the expert in them, like I'm the expert in languages?

"No one gets left behind," the woman says. "That's the ancient regulation. No matter how criminal, how perverted, how sick, no one gets left behind."

She looks at me as she says those things and she has that look in her eyes again. What I had initially taken for sympathy is something else. Fear? Disgust?

"The captain chose to follow that regulation," the woman says.

"Is that why he didn't run the announcement?" I ask.

"I don't presume to know why the captain does what he does," the woman says. "He should have left you behind."

"I know," I say.

Leona frowns at me and even though I don't know her, I can read her expression. *Shut up. Let me talk. I'm your advocate. Let me advocate.*

"You want to tell me why he didn't?" the woman asks.

I shrug one shoulder. I don't honestly know. I haven't talked to him. Since I got back, the entire Fleet's been attacked. We've moved, been hit, then moved to fold-space. I suspect the captain's been busy.

"Are you sure it was him who ordered me back?" I ask.

"Enough," Leona says. "We can talk all night, but until we have facts, I can't help you. And I need to know what you want. I know what they want. They want to test you."

She's looking at me, and her eyes hold no emotion at all. Only a few people can effectively do that. She's clearly learned it over the course of her career. She doesn't know what to think of me, and she doesn't want me to know that.

She wants me to think she's on my side.

As if I know what my side is.

"I can block the tests," she says.

My heart leaps as she says this, but I dry swallow yet again. I am afraid of the tests. I am afraid of what they will reveal. I am afraid of what they won't reveal.

"Why don't you study my case," I say, sounding calm and logical, which I am not, "and then we'll decide what to do."

"We need to take her out of the residential wing," the woman says. "She's dangerous."

"We don't know that," Leona says.

"We can assume," the woman says.

Leona turns back to her. The advocate's expression changes, from that flat look she gives me to something akin to anger. Only I'm not sure that emotion is real either.

"From my understanding," Leona says, "she's been here for days. If she was going to snap, she would have already. Lock the doors, post a guard, put some kind of monitor on her. But leave her here. You know as well as I do that familiarity provides comfort."

But the apartment isn't familiar. Well, part of it is. The furniture, the mementos that I have brought from previous trips, my bedding, my clothing.

But the view from the portal—it's unfamiliar, and bound to become more so. If I don't have to look outside the ship, I might feel better.

"Do you have portals in the evaluation ward?" I ask the woman.

"Yes," she says.

So outside lurks here, there, in any place they'd take me.

I let out a shaky sigh. "Then I'll stay here."

As if the decision is sane. As if I am. As if I would know the difference.

They all leave me, Leona who is off to do research, the three medical personnel. They've posted guards, just like Leona told them to, and they made a point of letting me know. The guards—both big, muscular men—displayed the laser pistols attached to their hips, and gave me a stern look.

The warning was clear. If I tried to leave, they'd shoot.

If I tried to leave. Which I'm not going to do.

Maybe they're the ones who aren't thinking. I'm the one who locked myself in my apartment. I'm the one who has hidden from everyone I love.

My twin sister Deirdre has left me increasingly urgent messages, using her technical skills to override the protections I've put on my private communications. She is worried, she says. She has heard horrible things, she says. She wants to see me, she says.

Too bad. I don't want to see her.

I don't want to see anyone.

Not even Coop.

Jonathon Cooper, our captain. My former husband. He looks like a captain of the Fleet should. He's tall, broad-shouldered, dark haired, handsome, and oh, so intelligent.

We married young and I was going to have a thousand babies, or maybe the acceptable two. But the babies never happened. Every time I got pregnant, I had to go planetside on some mission or another, and every time, I lost them.

The prenatal unit offered to harbor the fetuses for me, so that my risky job wouldn't have an impact on my children, but Coop didn't like the idea. For a man who has attached himself to a machine—loving the *Ivoire* more than anyone, anything else—he has very old-fashioned views about children. He believes that a child housed in a fetal unit will not have the warmth and compassion, the ability to bond with others, that regular humans do.

He might be right; Lord knows, he's shown me a lot of studies, all from the Fleet, all from various points in our history, all very scientific.

I know this, but I also know that gestating a child in the woman is no guarantee either. The fetus gets exposed to whatever the woman gets exposed to, and sometimes that exposure is toxic or strange or just plain terrifying.

*Dry, dry sand. Heat so extreme that my skin aches. The blood has dried on my skin and it stinks, rotting, even as it's attached to me. But I cannot get it off. I don't have the water to drink, let alone any to clean myself. I don't have—*

I stand up. My face feels flushed, my skin tight with dried blood.

I don't want to remember.

I put my hands on my cheeks. I was thinking about Coop. Coop and the babies that never were, and our perennial argument, and the way that he looks at me, even now, as if I have broken his heart.

We still love each other. But we are no longer *in love* with each other. If we ever were in love with each other.

I think we were in love with the idea of each other. Coop is a bona fide hero, a man who rushes in when he should hang back, who has saved countless lives, who always puts others first and rarely thinks of himself.

I'm the intellectual, the collected one, the one who thinks before she acts—who thinks in many languages before she acts. Coop has always been intrigued by my skills, my ability to make myself understood, to put myself in the place of another culture, another person, to become someone I'm not, even if only for a few minutes.

There is too much Coop to subsume into another human being, even for a moment. I'm beginning to understand that there is not enough me, and perhaps that's why I can completely vanish into another perspective, because mine is so fragile, so very frail.

Or is it? Coop always says I have a firm core. He may be right. That may be why I am still here—alive, one of three survivors. But that might also be why I can't remember, why I feel my brains leaking out of my skull, why my memory skips as if it were a rock skimming a clear mountain lake.

I am standing in the middle of my apartment, back to the portal, in foldspace, guards outside my door, my memory gone. I am here because my former husband still loves me too much to sacrifice me for the good of the ship, even though he makes up other reasons. Ancient regulations versus new regulations. Silly, that. He just can't abide sending me to the middle of that planet, as the war has heated up, a war we started.

Twenty-four died.

I survived.

Along with two others.

Whom I can't remember.

Just like I can't remember what happened to everybody else.

"Something odd is happening here," I say to Leona. I'm looking out my portal at foldspace. At least I think it's foldspace.

I recognize nothing out there, and neither does my computer. When I catch a moment, a moment when I can concentrate, I use my apartment computer, trying to figure out where we are. I have to use the information stored on the computer itself; the ship has cut me off. I can't get into any systems, even informational ones.

The message system doesn't even work properly. If I want to send a message to anyone other than the medical evaluation unit or Leona, I have to send it through the approval system. Someone else will listen to my complaints, read my notes, see my anxious face.

Rather than let that happen, I don't send messages.

Not that I feel like communicating anyway.

"Yes, something odd is happening," Leona says. "You're essentially imprisoned in your own apartment."

She sounds offended by this, which strikes me as strange. I'm not offended. I turn.

She's sitting at my table, her own portable notebook on her lap. Her dark hair is up, and she's wearing a formal tunic with matching pants.

"I'm not talking about me," I say, sweeping a hand toward the portal. "Something odd is happening on the ship. To the ship. I don't know where we are."

Her expression freezes as if I've said something wrong.

"Is this something you're not supposed to tell me?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I forgot, that's all. You can't access the news."

Shipboard news is an outside system. I've never really paid attention anyway, except when I needed to for my work, and even then, I'm not really watching. I'm listening—not to what's going on, but to how it's expressed.

I am the ship's senior linguist, a position as important as the captain's in its own way. Strange that I haven't thought of that since I've come back. I haven't identified myself as a linguist at all. I haven't missed the interplay of languages, the way that the same sentence in one language can mean something completely different when translated word for word into another.

Context, subtext, word origins, emotions, all contained in one little phrase, one little word. The difference between "an" and "the" can alter meaning dramatically.

And it's my job to know these subtleties in every language I specialize in. It's my job to understand them in the new languages I encounter. It's my job to make sure we can all communicate clearly, because the basis of diplomacy isn't action, it's words.

Words, words, words.

"You've gone pale," Leona says. "Do you need to sit down?"

"No." I walk back to the portal. It's space-black out there—not quite total darkness. The universe has its own light, and it's lovely, most of the time. But usually you can see the source—the star in the distance, the reflection off clouds protecting a planet's atmosphere.

I see nothing.

I have seen nothing for days.

I sometimes check my own eyesight to see if the problem is inside my head.  
(I'm so afraid it is inside my head.)

"What's the news?" I ask, even though I'm no longer sure I want to know.

She pauses. I turn. She's frowning. It's an expression I didn't expect to see on her face. She's not someone who lets her emotions near the surface.

I have a clear sense of how terrified she is, and how unwilling she is to admit it.

Although I can't tell you why I feel that way. I can't tell you how I know.

I just do.

Something subtle then, something subtle like the things I specialize in.

"The *anacapa* malfunctioned," she says. "We're becalmed."

*Becalmed*. A nautical term, adapted from Earth, in the days before ships sailed the heavens. In those days, ships sailed the waters, the seas, they were called, and being becalmed was dangerous.

Sailing ships had no engines. They were powered by the wind. And when the wind was gone, the ship didn't move. Sometimes, way out at sea, a becalmed ship wouldn't move for days, weeks, and the men—it was always men—on board would die.

Some say they died from thirst or lack of food.

But other accounts say that men who were becalmed died because conditions had driven them insane.

"Becalmed," I repeat, and sink into a nearby chair. My heartrate has increased.

Leona watches me, as if she's afraid of what the news will do to me.

She should be.

The Fleet adopted the word "becalmed" because it's the best way to describe being stuck in foldspace. The *anacapa* malfunctions, and we can't get back. It has happened throughout our history.

Ships get lost, some because they're becalmed. What no one knows, what no one can figure out, is if they're stuck in an alternate universe or in the actual fold of space itself.

If there is an actual fold of space.

We don't know—at least those of us who are in no real need to know. Coop probably knows. He's probably doing everything he can.

"Has he sent a distress?" I ask, because I can't not ask. I have to know, even though I do know. Of course Coop sent a distress. Of course he's run through procedure. Of course he's done everything he can do.

"Several," she says.

"And?"

"No one is responding." She looks at her well-manicured hand. "Some believe that our comm system is down."

I'm an expert in the comm system. I have to be. Because if the comm techs are incapacitated, someone from the linguistic staff still has to communicate to others. So my technical training—my *mechanical* training, to use another old Earth term—is in comm systems. I'm as good as (maybe better than) Coop's chief communications officer.

And no one has called me.

Maybe that's why I haven't heard any announcement. Not because Coop couldn't leave me behind, but because another emergency superseded mine.

Maybe I'm forgotten, a byproduct, something the junior members of the staff must deal with until the regular members have time to think about me.

"I have comm system expertise," I say, again, because I can't not say it.

"I know," Leona says.

But she says no more.

"When did the *anacapa* malfunction?" I ask.

She looks at me, as if I should remember. I don't remember.

"We were outgunned," she says. "The Quurzod were right behind us. They fired as we engaged the *anacapa*. We suffered a lot of damage, and that's when they think the drive malfunctioned."

This does not reassure me, which irritates me. Apparently I'd been hoping for reassurance.

"We don't know?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "It's hard to do assessments out here. They want to go to a

base, but no base is answering. We have limited equipment, limited supplies. We're on rations—."

She stops herself.

I stand up again. I'm like a child's toy—up, down, up, down. I can't stay still for a moment.

"We don't need to be on rations," I say. "We have enough supplies to last years."

Then it's my turn to freeze. We have enough supplies to last years if we know where we are. If we know where we're going. If we know we can get resupplied.

"They think no one will find us, don't they?" I whisper. "They think we're on our own."

She nods. Just once, as if nodding more than once would be too much acknowledgement, would make us complicit in something.

"They don't know where we are, do they?" I ask.

She shrugs, but it isn't a casual gesture. It's a frustrated gesture.

Shrugs are part of communication. The nuances of shrugs are something I have learned over time.

"They need me," I say.

"Yes," she says. "They do."

But she doesn't move, and she doesn't say any more. She's eloquent in her silences.

They need me, but they haven't come for me. They believe I can't help them, because I'm somehow damaged, because I've done something wrong.

"Is that why the medical evaluation team came?" I say. "To get me back to work?"

She looks at that manicured hand again. She doesn't reply. Is that a no? Suddenly for all my training in subtlety, all I've learned about reading gestures, I can't tell.

Finally, she takes a breath. She was steeling herself to talk with me. She isn't sure I should hear this, but she's going to tell me anyway.

"Do you know why the Quurzod came after us so vehemently?" she asks.

"No." I don't remember much after staggering into that village, after someone gasped, pulled me aside, touched my caked skin.

I collapsed, and woke up on a bed, hooked up to an IV, liquid applied directly into the veins because I couldn't drink on my own. I woke up later in the hospital wing on the *Ivoire*, refreshed, no longer burned, my skin smooth and clean and my mouth no longer dry.

I have no idea how I got there, only that I did.

"The Quurzod came because of you," she says.

I look at her.

"We lost twenty-four," she says. "They lost more."

I cannot move. "How many more?"

She shrugs—oh, so eloquent. Not frustrated this time, but an I-don't-know shrug, an is-an-exact-number-really-important? shrug. "You tell me."

I have to force myself to breathe. "You're saying it's my fault?"

"I'm not saying anything," she says.

But she is. Oh, she is.

Because I am responsible for communications, language, *diplomacy*.

If we went in twenty-seven strong—and we did—that means we went in as a team. A planetside team usually has thirty, but I remember—(do I? Or am I making this up?)—that we lost three because they couldn't stomach the Quurzod.

Not that the Quurzod are so different from us. We haven't discovered any aliens in our travels—not true aliens, anyway, not aliens in the way that we define them, as sentient creatures who build and create and form attachments like we do. We've found strange creatures and even stranger plants, but nothing like the human race.

We have found humans throughout our centuries of travel, though. Thousands and

thousands of other types of humans. Each with different languages, different skills, different levels of development.

But ultimately exactly the same—emotional, callous, brilliant, sad—capable of great good and great violence, often within the same culture.

The Quurzod—the Quurzod, oh, I remember the briefings, snatches of the briefings at any rate. They make an art out of violence. They kill and maim and do so with great relish. When they committed genocide against the Xenth, they did so with psychopathic glee—killing children in front of parents, torturing loved ones, experimenting to see what kind of punishment a human body could take before it had enough and simply quit.

The stories distressed my team. Three couldn't face the Quurzod.

It makes no sense. If I started this, then that was all the more reason to leave me behind. We're taught from childhood that sacrifices are necessary.

We travel in a fleet of ships five hundred strong. We split off for various missions, and sometimes we sacrifice an entire ship if we have to. An individual life—one of at least five hundred lives on the *Ivoire* alone—means less than the mission.

The mission: to provide assistance throughout the known universe. We are the good guys, the rescuers; we are the ones who make the wrongs right. We do what we can, interfere if we must, help when we're needed.

And when we make mistakes, we make them right.

We don't run.

It seems like we ran.

"I want to talk to Coop," I say.

Leona shakes her head. "Not until you can tell us what happened."

"Then I should let the medical evaluation unit run their tests."

Her head shaking becomes more pronounced. "You can't. We need truth here, not legal tricks."

"Tricks?" I say. "They'll be using equipment, running diagnostics—"

"Asking you questions, putting memories in your head." She runs her hand over her notebook. "We'll wait until your own memories return."

She looks at the portal, then back at me.

"After all," she says dismally. "We have time."

Sometimes I sleep. The body demands it, and when it can no longer function without sleep, I doze wherever I am.

I have fallen asleep on the divan. I love the divan. I have put it in the center of my living area, where most people have group seating. But I never hold meetings here.

I used to study on it, let words dance around me as I spoke them. They'd turn red if I pronounced something wrong, and they'd vanish if spoken correctly. I loved word dancing. I loved study.

Now I lie on the divan and I stare out the portal at all that nothing, not thinking at all. Words don't even run through my head. I know I've been thinking, but I cannot articulate what the thoughts are.

Yet as I fall asleep, I know I am asleep. I feel the divan beneath me, note that the apartment is a bit too cold, think I should tell the apartment's system to adjust the heat. Or I should grab a blanket from the bedroom. I should be comfortable.

*But I am not. I claw my way through a pile of stinky, sticky flesh. Arms move, legs flop, a head turns toward me, eyes gone. I force myself not to look. I am climbing people and I know that if I don't I will die.*

I jerk awake, shudder, trying to get the images from my head. Leona wants me to remember.

I don't.

I get up and take a blanket off my bed. Then I stop and look at the wall, the only wall I have decorated.

An old blanket—a quilt, to use the proper term—adds color to the room. Pinks and reds and glorious blues, mixed together in a wedding ring pattern. The quilt has been in my family for generations, given, my mother said, to an ancestor as the Fleet embarked from Earth itself.

I don't know for certain because I've never tested the quilt. I keep it out of harsh light. It's preservation framed, done by my grandmother, and its beauty should remind us of tradition, of homes we'll never see again, of family.

I have cousins on other ships in the Fleet, family, some distant in corridors down the way. We are not close. My sister has a daughter, and if I never have children, this quilt will go to her.

I wrap the blanket around myself and walk back to the divan. I recline on it again, look out the portal, see that brightly lit blackness, threatening starshine, but not delivering it.

And—

*I'm still climbing. The sunlight beats down on me, the heat nearly unbearable. I've been praying for the wind to stop since I got here, but now that it has, I want it back, if only to get rid of the insects and the stench.*

*I am the only one alive. I do not want to look but I do—faces, eyes especially, eyes glazed over and an odd white. Blood everywhere. I climb, standing on people and if I look up, I can see an edge to the pit I am in.*

*I stop, listen, hear only my ragged breathing. If I can hear it, someone else can hear it too. Someone lurking out there. Someone who will—*

I can't do it this way. There is no comfort in this apartment, in these rooms. If this is a memory, then I do not want to be alone with it.

If it is a nightmare, I want it banished.

If it is an example of how I will live from now on, I cannot. I will not. I will die before I continue like this.

I contact Leona. Her face appears on my wall screen, looking concerned. I do not give her time to speak.

I say, "I'm going to have the evaluations."

And then I sever the link.

The guards escort me to the medical unit. I'm not used to being escorted. I'm used to leading. But these two men, both bigger than me, walk beside me, brushing against me, making it clear that I'm in their power.

They lead me down one of the main corridors in the ship, so it's wide enough for people to pass us. Everyone who does averts their eyes, partly because I no longer look like me, and partly because I'm being escorted.

Just because there are five hundred of us on the ship doesn't mean we all know each other. Some of us apprenticed on other ships. Some of us grew up elsewhere in the Fleet. I met Coop on the *Brazza*, when we were going to school. That we both ended up on the senior staff of the *Ivoire* had less to do with our designs than with our abilities, and a gap in leadership at the *Ivoire* at the time.

Back then I was young enough not to realize that I profited from other people's failures. I notice now.

Just like I'm being noticed, even though people are looking away. They see a crazed woman, hair down, so distracted she forgot to put on shoes before she told the guards she wanted to go to the medical unit. I'm walking through the cold corridors with bare feet, wearing a knee-length white shirt and matching pants—my comfort clothes—in a place where almost everyone else is in uniform.

The medical evaluation unit is on the fifth level of the medical wing. Everything here is as white as my clothing, with nanobots that keep the walls and floors clean. My bare feet leave footprints that get erased by the nanobots after just a moment. The dirt from the guards' shoes evaporates as quickly as well.

The staff working in the medical unit must work one week in other parts of the ship. This area is too sterile for good human health, and the medical personnel who do not leave find themselves developing allergies and sensitivities to the most normal things—like skin cells and cooking oils.

I've put in time in the medical unit as well—all of the linguists do as part of our training. We program the medical database with medical terms from any new language we've learned. We also train the staff to speak the most rudimentary forms of many languages—enough to ask after another person's health—and to understand the answers.

The guards lead me to the fifth level. There a woman waits for me. She's not the woman who invaded my apartment. Nor is she anyone I know.

She's tiny, with raven black hair, black eyes, and a straight line for a mouth. She extends her hand.

"I'm Jill Bannerman," she says. "I'll help you through the evaluation."

"I can't do anything until my advocate gets here," I say. The words come out awkward and ungracious. I'm excellent at being accommodating, at saying the right thing at the right time—or I used to be.

"I know," Bannerman says. "I'll get you ready, and then we'll wait for her. She should be here shortly."

I don't know what ready means. It makes me nervous. I shake my head. "I'd like to wait."

"All right," she says, as if she expected that. "Sit here. We'll get started as soon as she arrives."

She leads me to an orange chair that curves around my body as I sit. I'm so paranoid that I wonder if it's taking readings from me.

But the *Ivoire*—the Fleet, actually—has privacy laws. Even if this chair records information off me, no one can use the information without my permission.

Have I given permission by agreeing to the evaluation? I have no idea. I should have checked with Leona first.

That's what she'll say.

Jill Bannerman speaks softly to my guards, then she leaves the room. The guards move out of the main area and back outside the doors. I'm alone in a room with half a dozen chairs, with walls that reset themselves, and furniture that changes color every ten minutes. First orange, then red, then mauve, then purple, then blue. I watch the furniture, a bit unnerved by it all.

There is nothing else to watch, no entertainment, no open portals, no other people. Just me and the constantly changing furniture.

I tuck my cold feet underneath my legs and make myself breathe deeply. I want to tap my fingertips on the chair, but someone will read that as nervousness, I'm sure. I don't know why I'm worried that they will notice—it's hard to miss, and if the system is recording my vital signs, the nervousness will show in my elevated heart rate, my slightly higher than normal blood pressure, and even in my breathing.

The only thing I'm not doing right now is regretting my decision. I'm suddenly quite happy to be out of my apartment. I hadn't realized how claustrophobic I felt in it, how shut down I had been. How terrified.

The doors slide open and Leona sweeps in. Her green tunic changes the color scheme in the room. Now the chairs float through forest colors—green, dark green, blue-green, blue. She slides into a chair across from me.

"We can still leave," she says.

I shake my head.

"We need a consult, and we can't have it here," she says.

So I *am* being monitored. "I'm doing this," I say.

"You made that clear," she says. "Now we determine how to do it best for you."

Whatever that means.

"There's a privacy room just over there," she says. "We're using it."

I've read up on advocacy. She's not supposed to give me orders. She's supposed to follow mine. But she's worried and I'm not strong enough to fight her. Besides, I'm not leaving the medical evaluation unit. I'm just stepping into a private room for a few minutes to consult with my advocate.

I don't have to take her advice.

She touches the wall and a door slides open. I hadn't noticed it while I was waiting, distracted (apparently) by the constantly changing furniture.

This room is also white with a black conference table that has grown out of the floor. Two chairs sit side by side. I suppose if more people walk in, more chairs will grow out of their storage spots on the floor.

The overhead lights spotlight the chairs and nearby, coffee brews as if someone set it up for us. Leona ignores it, but I help myself. As I touch the coffee pot, pastries slide in from the far wall. Pastries and an entire plate of fruit, some of it exotic.

"I thought we're on rations," I say to her.

"We are, but maybe the medical wing is exempt."

The food gets her up and she stacks a plate with strudels and danishes and things I don't even have a name for. I grab a banana which looks like it came from one of the hydroponics bays, and something with lots of frosting and raisins.

My stomach actually growls. I'm not sure when the last time I ate was.

We sit down with our food and our coffees, suddenly so civilized.

She picks up one of the danishes, but doesn't take a bite. "I know I can't change your mind, but I want you to know what's at risk."

I eat the banana first. It's green and chewy, not really ripe, almost sour. I don't care. It feels like the first food I've eaten in years, even though it's not.

"I found out why they brought you back to the ship," Leona says.

That, of all things, catches my attention. It sounds ominous.

"Why?"

"They need to know what happened planetside. They need to know if it's our fault."

A shiver runs down my back. If it's our fault. Of course it's our fault. The Fleet meddles. That's what we do.

"What do the other two survivors say?" I ask.

She doesn't look at me. Instead she takes a bite of that danish and eats slowly. I want to push her on this. I want her to tell me everything right now.

But some vestiges of my training remain. I sit and watch, counting silently to myself because it's the only way I can keep still. Stillness used to be my best weapon. I could wait for anyone. I could listen forever, and learn, without making a move. But I seem to have lost that ability. I'm restless now, and time feels like it has speeded up. Even though I know it has only taken a moment for her to eat that small bite of pastry, it feels as if she has taken an hour.

"What do they say?" I ask because I can't wait any longer. So much for stillness.

"I don't know," she says. "I haven't spoken to them directly."

"But you know," I press.

She shrugs a shoulder—a sorry-said-all-I-can shrug.

Then she sets the pastry down and wipes her hand on a small napkin. "Look," she says. "If that mess turns out to be our fault, then you'll probably be executed. Now do you see why I don't want you to do this?"

"I need to do this," I say softly.

"Why?" she asks.

"The memories are coming back. I can't experience them on my own. It's better if they all come back at once."

She stares at me, and then sighs. "I'll see what I can do," she says, and leaves.

I sit in that room for what feels like forever, but really is only about an hour. There is a bathroom next to the service area, and I'm able to use that, but I'm not able to leave the room itself. I pace. I count to ten in fifteen languages. Then in six more. And then I start over because I can't remember all the languages I just tried.

I've just started counting to one hundred when Leona returns.

"Jill Bannerman is outside," Leona says. "When she comes in here, you tell her what you told me about not being able to cope. Be dramatic. The more threatened you feel the better."

"I won't be lying," I say. "I can't do this alone."

Those words are so inadequate. If I close my eyes, I can feel the heat, the blood drying on my skin, the bodies rolling beneath my hands. I can't sit still with that. I have to move. And the more of it that comes back to me, the more movement I need to make.

"You tell her that," Leona says. "Make it very clear that this is a medical issue."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because that gives you legal protection. You'll be considered a patient, not a criminal. If they had taken you that afternoon when you called me, you'd've been a criminal. Just like you would have been if you hadn't waited for me today. This way, you'll be able to say anything, do anything, and it won't come out in a legal proceeding. At least not in detail. The ship's staff can have an advocate in the room, and he can testify to what you say, but it won't have the force of your testimony. It can only be used to start an investigation, which they're already running."

I stare at her. She thinks I've done something wrong. They all seem to think I've done something wrong. Is that why I can't remember?

"Before you decide," she says, "this is your last chance to go back to your apartment. You can do this on your own and no one will ever have to know."

My stomach clenches. "And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will I ever be able to leave my apartment? Will I be able to return to my duties?"

She shakes her head. "You'll be alive. Isn't that enough?"

I think about the view from my portal. Stuck in foldspace with nothing to see. The same walls, a different view, if we're lucky, but the same walls for the rest of my life. No more languages. No more work.

No more friends or family.

Just me. Alive. In my apartment.

Becalmed.

"Send her in," I say, "and I'll tell her the truth."

The truth is that I am terrified of my own mind. The truth is that I'm afraid my memories will kill me. I'm afraid if I never access them, they will kill me, and I'm afraid if I do remember, I can't live with them.

Somehow I stammer that out to Jill Bannerman and she takes some kind of notes and Leona gets her dispensation or whatever it is and I meet the senior staff's advocate, a man named Rory Harper, whom I've seen before, but I can't remember in what context.

He's older, fifties, sixties, silvering hair and a dignity that I don't like. I don't want someone like him to see me go through the tests. I don't want anyone to see me.

But I have no choice.  
So I agree to everything, and end up here.

You never see the whole ship, no matter what ship you're on. About fifty ships have a specialty. Those ships never go on planetside missions because we don't want to lose them. I got the last of my education on the *Brazza*. The *Brazza* specializes in education, the *Sante* specializes in medical training, the *Eiffel* specializes in engineering, and the *Seul* specializes in officer training, just to name a few.

And even on the *Brazza*, adventurous and young, I never explored the entire ship. No one did, no one could. There was just too much to see, too much to do.

And here, on the *Ivoire*, even though I've worked in the medical wing, I've never seen these rooms.

The testing rooms.

They're dark and strange, buried deep within the ship. They feel like the very center of the ship, even though they cannot be. The *Ivoire*, like all of the vessels in the Fleet, has a birdlike design—a narrow, curved front, expanding to a massive body in the center with wider sections that seem like wings, and a final tail toward the back. This makes the *Ivoire* sound small, but it is not.

The medical unit is in one of the wider sections, with easy access from several areas of the ship. The unit is several levels down, with a lot of material between it and the exterior, unlike my apartment, which is right on the edge. If an attack destroys a section of the ship, that section mostly will not include the medical unit.

Or these testing facilities.

They seem close, cavelike, and my breath catches as I step inside.

I will be alone in here, with doctors of all kinds, as well as my advocate (Leona) and the ship's advocate (Harper) observing through the walls. Or through something. I am a bit unclear on the mechanism.

Jill assures me that I will be safe, that the monitors in the floor, the walls, the very room itself, will know when I am too emotional to continue, and will pull me back. I will rest, then, and maybe even receive something to help me into a dreamless sleep.

I do not like this room. I do not like the low light, the dark interior, the cushy floor. I want a portal or a screen or something familiar. Before the door closes, I catch her arm.

"Is there somewhere else to do this?"

She shakes her head. "This room is safe."

"I don't like it," I say. "There's nothing here."

She gives me a sad look that I suspect she intended as compassionate. "We need the room to mold around you. Nothing in here can contradict what's happening inside your mind. That's probably what's making you uncomfortable."

I cannot go inside. I remain in the doorway. "I'm sorry," I say. "I can't do this."

"It will help you."

I shake my head—or rather, I shake my head even more. I don't realize until this moment that I've been shaking my head all along.

"No," I say. "I can't go in this room."

Somehow Leona has found her way to my side. "If she doesn't want to go in, she doesn't have to."

Leona's voice is firmer than mine. Its forcefulness makes my stomach muscles tighten. I feel nauseous.

"People often balk before going in," Jill says. "It's part of the process. Your memories are difficult, and the fear you feel has to do with them, not with the room."

I'm still shaking my head. "No."

Leona slips her arm around my back. She leads me out of the area. Jill follows, uttering soothing words, trying to coerce me back into that room.

I can't. I won't.

We get to the main room—the room that constantly changes—it's white now, with yellow accents—and I burst into tears.

Part of me stands aside and watches myself cry. I don't cry. I can count the number of times I've shed tears, including the day my parents died.

The crying feels alien, as if there is a part of me that I cannot control.

"I'm sorry," I manage.

"It's better," Leona says.

But it's not. I'll be alone, in my room, dealing with the memories all by myself.

At least I'll have a portal.

That views foldspace.

Nothingness.

Becalmed.

But the dreams are gone as if they have never been. As if a mere attempt to enter the room has taken the memories from my head and made me feel more human.

I clean up, then I clean the apartment. I find a language in the database, an old language, a dead language (or so they think) and I proceed to learn it, word for ancient word.

I am digging in for forever, when my door chirrups. A preprogrammed signal, the only one I've put in my door's system.

For Coop.

My breath catches. I don't want to see him. I do want to see him. I want him to go away. I want him to tell me everything.

I go to the door, but do not open it. I engage the comm. "You're supposed to be running the ship."

"I am," he says. I recognize that tone. It's constrained—his captain's tone. His I'm-not-alone-so-don't-bother-me-with-personal-stuff tone. "I'm coming in."

He's captain. He can override any command on this ship.

I step back, run a hand over my hair, check my blouse. I've been dressing like a professional ever since I came back, ever since I started my new language, even though I never thought I'd see anyone again. I need the pretense.

I need to think I'll have a use again.

He comes in, and waits as the door closes behind him.

I'm always startled at how much older he looks. Not that command has aged him, although it has, it's just that I remember the boy I fell for, the handsome dark-haired boy full of promise, and now that boy has become a man—a powerful man—who stands before me.

He's wearing his black uniform with silver piping, the everyday uniform, nothing special. He would look normal if it weren't for his hair. He hasn't tended to it in days, and it has grown long, brushing his collar, making him seem almost unkempt.

"They say you're refusing treatment," he says.

I can't tell if this visit is compassionate or a ship problem. I can't tell if he's here because he's my former husband and still my friend, or if he's here because he's the ship's captain, or both.

I'm not sure I should be able to tell.

"I went to them for help, but I can't go in the treatment rooms." It sounds crazy. I sound crazy. But I'm beginning to come to terms with that. I think I am crazy.

"The doctors say you're claustrophobic," he says. "That's why you can't go in. You've never been claustrophobic before."

I look at him, a denial about to cross my lips. Then—

—*the bodies pile on top of me. I'm drowning in them, afraid to move, afraid not to*

*move, my head wedged in a slightly angled position. I catch some air, but not much. Enough, apparently, to keep me breathing, even though I feel like I'm being crushed.*

I curse and realize that I'm sitting down. Coop is crouched before me.

"What was that?" he asks.

I tear up. I blink, hoping that he won't notice. "The memories," I say. Then I take a deep breath, determined to change the subject. "Why are they letting you in here? What if I'm dangerous?"

He smiles. "You're not."

"The medical evaluation unit thought I was."

"They're wrong," he says.

"You don't know that," I say. "You can't know that."

"You got brainwashed in a month planetside? You've a firm core, remember? No one can brainwash you. That's why you're such a good linguist. You can keep your sense of self while understanding others."

"Anyone can change," I say. My heart is beating hard. "They think I killed twenty-four people."

He has taken my right hand. He holds it gently, and rises just a little so that he's not crouching any more. He sits beside me, like a shy lover, but there's nothing romantic in his posture.

"Twenty-four people died," he says. "And you didn't. That's what we know."

"Why didn't you leave me there?" I ask. "That's protocol."

"I wasn't about to leave you there," he says.

I look at him. I don't know how to respond. So I say, "You should let me look at the communications array."

"I'd love to," he says. "But I can't. Not until we know what you've done."

"What do the others say?"

"They say you abandoned them." His voice is harsh. "They say you left everyone to fend for themselves."

"I would never do that." The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. This time his smile is real. "I know," he says. "I think they're lying."

Quurzid, the language the Quurzod speak, is a mixture of six different languages we've encountered in this sector. Only the Quurzod have toughened up the words, shortened the syntax, added guttural sounds and some glottal stops that none of the other languages have.

Yet the Quurzod language flows, like music, even with the harshness. Almost because of the harshness—atonal and oddly beautiful, spare, austere, and to the point.

I can hear the Quurzod talking all around me, even though I am not with them. I am sitting in that awful testing room. Coop walked me inside, his arm around my back. His presence reassures me, even though it shouldn't, even though we shouldn't get along. We're not a couple any more.

Yet some vestiges of couplehood remain.

Coop has left—he's on call, which means if I need him, and he's not handling some emergency, he'll come. But my sister sits outside this room. My twin sister, Deirdre.

We no longer look alike, she and I. We've lived our lives so differently that what once looked identical now just looks familial. If I had lived her life, I would look like her—heavier, settled, smile lines around her mouth. Her hair flows around her face, and her eyes are soft.

Deirdre waits for me in the waiting room, even though she knows this might take a day or more. She doesn't care. She acts as if I'm dying of some dread disease, and for all we know, I am. Some mental disease.

I have already settled onto the floor of this strange room, but it hasn't curved around me yet. It's waiting for me to give the go-ahead. Because I balked the first time, I get an extra five minutes to reconsider my choice.

I'm not going to change my mind.

The Quurzod whisper around me. If I close my eyes, I'll be able to see them. They met us on a broad plain, the sun setting behind them. It was a dramatic and powerful introduction, the sky blood-red as the light died.

The Xenth warned us that the Quurzod would be dramatic. The Xenth warned us that the Quurzod would lie.

My arms are pressed against my side. Something has punctured the skin in my wrist. My eyes flutter open for a moment, and it becomes clear that the room has absorbed me.

My breath catches in complete panic. My heart races. I want to claw myself out, I want to climb, I need to—

*—get out. Escape. I could die in here. I will die in here if I'm not careful. I will disappear and no one will know what happened to me in this bloody silence, this stench, this heat and the pressure and the horrible horrible—*

"No," I whisper. It takes me a moment to realize I whisper in Quurzid. Unlike most human languages which use simple words, often words of one syllable, for no, Quurzid uses seven syllables for no—a long, complicated word, one that requires a lot of effort to speak correctly. You can't involuntarily finish the word "no" in Quurzid, like you can in Standard. "No" in Standard slips out. In Quurzid, you know what you're saying by the third syllable, and you can leave the word unfinished.

The Quurzid word for "no" is the most deliberate word for "no" in any language I've encountered.

And that's the word I spoke. A deliberate word, one that shows I do not now—or ever—want to revisit those memories.

For a moment, I imagine screaming for help, thinking of escape, like they told me to, so that the room will release me. But then I will see my sister's face as I leave, filled with disappointment and fear and concern.

My sister, the caretaker, knows that she will be responsible for me, because she can't *not* be responsible for me, no matter how much I try to keep her out.

I close my eyes as the whispers start again, the Quurzod, talking among themselves as they stood on that ridge. They were half naked, only their arms and legs covered with some kind of paint, a bit of armor across their genitals. The women as well as the men are bare-chested. They show no shame in revealing their bodies, unlike some cultures we've encountered.

Unlike the Xenth.

The Xenth should have been the musical ones. Their language is all sibilants intermingled with soft "ch" sounds and the occasional sighing vowel. But the effect isn't musical. It's creepy, as if something is hissing with disapproval or anger.

Three of our people quit at the prospect of facing the Quurzod, but it was the Xenth who terrified me. The Xenth with their too-thin women, wearing long sleeves and high-neck collars and tight pants that sealed at the ankles, even in the heat. The Xenth, whose men looked at me as if I were not just dressed improperly but suggestively.

I wore a uniform that covered everything except my neck, and I considered coming back to the ship just so I could get the proper clothing. But our Xenth hosts assured me there was no time. They wanted us to broker some kind of resolution to a fight between them and the Quurzod, a fight over a genocide that had occurred a year before, a fight that could—in the opinion of the Xenth—lead to planetwide war.

We had studied everything, or so we thought. Sixteen different cultures existed on

the only continent on Ukhanda. Sixteen different cultures with only two that had the military might to dominate—the Quurzod and the Xenth. The Xenth controlled the plains, but the Quurzod held the mountains. They also controlled most of the airways, giving the Xenth the seas. Both had space flight, but the Quurzod used it to their own advantage.

How the Xenth contacted us, I am not certain. They didn't contact the *Ivoire*. They contacted one of the other ships in our Fleet, and decisions went up the chain of command. The *Ivoire* got involved because of me. Because I am—was—had been—the best linguist in the Fleet.

My heart twists. I open my eyes. The room is the color of that twilight, blood red and gold, with shadowy figures lining the walls. My stomach turns.

*I can't do this. I can't do it. I can't.*

But if I don't, I'll die.

I have no idea if the words I'm thinking come from the meeting or that horrible memory of the bodies or come from now. I hate the way my arms press against my sides. I shift, and am surprised that the floor shifts with me. I can—if I want—pull that thing from my wrist, the thing that is going to keep me hydrated and nourished, and flee this place. Go on my own, figure things out by myself. Live my own damn life.

Alone.

Becalmed.

I take a deep breath.

I have never fled from a battle in my life.

I force my eyes closed and let the memories overtake me.

I came to the meetings late. Linguists from the flagship, *Alta*, had flanked the diplomats, talking with the Xenth long before I arrived. I got study materials and cultural documents one week before my first meeting, and that meeting was with the Xenth.

The Xenth's capital city, Hileer, was a port city. The buildings on the bay had glass walls facing the water, but deeper inland, the buildings had no windows at all. The Xenth built backward—or what I thought of as backward—the tallest buildings by the view with the rest getting progressively shorter the farther away from the water we got. Only doors had glass, and then only a small rectangle, built at eye-level, so that the person inside could see who knocked.

The buildings of state, where the parties and balls and ceremonies were held, stood bayside, but the buildings of government, where the actually governing occurred, were single-story structures miles from the waterline.

The ceilings were low, the doorways lower, and the interiors too dark for my taste. They were also both chilly and stuffy, as if the air got recycled only rarely. Add to that the hissing, scratching sound of the Xenth language, and for the first time in my long and storied career, I felt a distinct on-sight aversion to the people I was meeting.

I had to work to smile, work to touch palms—their greeting—work to concentrate on their words, instead of their shifting eyes that were as much a part of their communication as hand gestures were to some cultures. I did learn to understand the eye shifts, but try as I might, I could not add them to my personal repertoire. I apologized in advance, and the Xenth seemed to understand.

I had no real diplomatic importance to them. I was there to listen, learn, and discover all I could about the Quurzod.

The Xenth had asked for help with them.

What the Xenth told us that afternoon is this: Their quarrels with the Quurzod went back five hundred years. Initially, they had border skirmishes that caught al-

most no attention. Neither the Xenth nor the Quurzod cared much about their shared borders.

They did care about the seas, and sea battles between both countries had become legendary, but rare. Usually the ships passed each other in international waters, threatening, but not following up on the threats.

But travel became easier, as both sides built roads, discovered their own personal air travel, and slowly conquered space. Neither group were nation-builders, at least initially. They didn't want to conquer the other side and take their land. But no one could define exactly what land belonged to whom on those shared borders, and as travel became more commonplace, so did the border skirmishes, which led to many deaths, which led to formal armed hostilities, which led to full-scale warfare at least a dozen times in the past 250 years.

Another culture, the Virrrzd, negotiated the first peace treaty for the Xenth and Quurzod, and it held (tentatively) for thirty years. Then the border skirmishes started up again, along with raids into each other's territories.

The raids went deeper and deeper, growing more and more violent, until the Quurzod committed an out-and-out massacre, killing every single Xenth man, woman, and child within one hundred miles of what the Quurzod believed to be the border.

The Xenth immediately called for another peace conference, demanding reparations. The Quurzod came, and as both sides made actual headway, Quurzod along the border died hideously.

The Quurzod claimed that they were attacked by an illegal chemical weapon, long banned on Ukhanda. The Xenth claimed that the Quurzod's own building materials had an adverse reaction with chemicals the Xenth used for land cultivation. The Quurzod deaths, the Xenth claimed, were caused by their own greed in gobbling up the land.

The Fleet arrived just as the war along the border was about to escalate again. The *Alta* contacted both sides and offered to broker a deal between them. Only the Xenth took the *Alta* up on it.

The Quurzod were too busy burying their dead. Or so we were told.

Claims, counterclaims, historical arguments so detailed that even the locals did not understand all of them. The Fleet managed to hold off hostilities by patrolling the border with our own people. We have small fighters that we used to fly over the disputed area, keeping both sides away. We had maintained that position during the months of negotiation.

Finally, the Quurzod agreed to talks, so long as there would be no activity along the border during that time. *No chance for backstabbing*, or so they said.

My team would go in three months in advance of the diplomats. We would become as Quurzod as possible, learn their culture, their traditions, their rituals. We wouldn't go native—we had learned over the years that too many cultures had found the attempt to go native as deep an insult (or perhaps a deeper insult) than failing to learn the language.

So much of communication is nonverbal. Eye movements like the Xenth had, hand gestures found in so many Earth cultures, smiles or lack thereof in a series of cultures in the previous sector. These things could make or break a delicate negotiation.

I'd heard rumors—impossible to substantiate without talking to the Quurzod themselves—that Quurzid had a four-tiered structure. The first was a formal tier, for strangers within the Quurzod culture. Extremely polite, with its own sentence structure and vocabulary. The second was the familial tier for family and close friends, informal in its sentence structure with a private vocabulary, often known only to the family/friends themselves. The third was street Quurzid, offensive, abrupt, and as violent as the culture. Again, a different sentence structure and vocabulary. Used in

threatening situations, among the criminal classes, and by the military in times of war.

Finally, there was diplomatic Quurzid, which bore almost no relation to any of the other forms of Quurzid at all. So far as I could tell, diplomatic Quurzid evolved as a language to speak to enemies, without giving them any insight into the Quurzod at all.

The Virrrzd were the ones who figured that out, which was why they could successfully broker the original deal with the Xenth. But the Virrrzd were unwilling to get involved this time—the conflict between the Xenth and Quurzod had taken such a nasty turn that the Virrrzd were afraid for their own safety.

The Virrrzd knew both formal and diplomatic Quurzid, but not street or familial Quurzid. We felt—the linguists, the diplomats, the Fleet—that the only way to settle this dispute between the Xenth (who had only one language in only one form) and the Quurzod was to quite simply learn to communicate fully with the Quurzod.

Which was why my team got sent in.

I surface to sibilants (*whisper, whisper, hiss, hiss, hiss*) and shudder as I open my eyes. The room is dark and has folded around me. I can't really see anything. My heart pounds. I have no idea how much time has passed.

I'm supposed to get lost in the memories, and maybe I am lost, but it doesn't feel like the kind of lost I expected. It's almost as if I'm having a conversation with someone else, not reliving the past. Not like—

—*clawing, climbing, reaching, bodies rolling beneath my feet, shifting against my hand, the feel of dried blood on my cheek, the cold flesh under my palms. That's lost. I'm lost. I'll never survive*—

I'm holding my breath. I have to make myself breathe and as I inhale the breath sounds like a sob. The air has a faint tinge of rot—is that what this place does? It mimics what happened?—and I think it'd be so easy to escape, so easy to leave—

Only to live in my room forever. Forever slipping, dreaming, hiding from my own brain, my own memories.

I close my eyes and force myself back inside, force myself to breathe—

—the hot dry air. A small headache has formed between my eyes. The Quurzod are not cordial, although we've been here for weeks. My host family will not talk while I am in the room. I hear them whispering when I am nearby, and I strain to listen. But they use formal Quurzid whenever I'm around.

Fortunately, my team fares better. They have made recordings of Quurzid in all its glory, marking what they believe to be familial Quurzid and what they believe to be street Quurzid.

No Quurzod will tell us the difference. Once the Quurzod figured out that we wanted to know the entirety of their language, they stopped treating us like guests and started treating us as if we were Xenth.

Except for Klaaynch. Klaaynch is thin, reedy, beautiful according to our culture—long blond hair and classic features—but strange to the Quurzod, whose features are thicker, hair generally a dark, almost orangish red. I cannot quite tell how old Klaaynch is. She's one of those girls who looks the same at thirteen as she will at twenty-three.

I'm guessing she's eighteen or so, very curious, with a gift for language. She already speaks some Standard poorly, learned through overheard snatches of discussion.

She reminds me of myself. All ears, wanting to know what everyone is saying, no matter what language they speak.

Her family won't host, so she watches me from afar. I eat in the prescribed visitor

restaurants, and stay in the visitor hotel when I am not with my host family. The Quurzod agreed to host families, but balked at overnight stays, and frowned on sharing meals. "Host" is not really a good term for what they're doing, but we have no other. They are sharing as much as they can.

Klaaynch cannot sit with me in a visitor restaurant, and I cannot go to a Quurzod-only place. Sometimes she sits beneath one of the arching trees that mark every intersection. I have learned to eat outside in the visitor restaurants, at the table closest to the tree. Klaaynch and I talk, or try to, and she has promised me she will teach me familial Quurzid.

She says in diplomatic Quurzid (the only Quurzid I know fluently), *They cannot tell me who my friends are. They cannot determine who I care about and who I do not. If they try, I shall challenge them.*

I admire her reasoning.

And her courage. She wants to step outside her culture and learn other cultures. She wants to become more than who she is.

Is this what Coop says he saw in me? This desire for knowledge, the desire to add to the core by reaching beyond the training, beyond the culture?

I sit and murmur to Klaaynch, not knowing that her face—

*—is the first one I see, rolling toward me, eyes open, mouth gone, as if someone cut it away, those cheekbones crushed, her hair wrapped around her neck. She is buried just above me, thrown on top of me, her blood on my skin—*

I gasp, and this time I am thinking of escape long before I vocalize it. I claw the floor, the needle poking my skin, the darkness holding me. I climb out and crawl toward the door, nearly there when Jill reaches me. She drags me out of the room as if she's dragging me out of that pit.

I stumble and fall against Deirdre who asks me what's wrong, asks me to talk to her, asks me what I need.

"Leona," I say. "Please. Find Leona."

And then I pass out.

And wake in one of the hospital beds, like I found myself in after they rescued me on Ukhanda. Leona is there, but not there. She flits in, she flits out. She won't talk to me in the medical wing. She forces me to wait until I am well enough to sit in a conference room without any medical equipment at all. She is even going to bring the chairs.

She knows that I know. She doesn't know *what* I know. Just that I know.

And I ache because of it.

I ache.

Cultures do not invent languages and traditions overnight. They evolve over time. And while some linguists believe that the language comes before the culture, I believe that the language serves the culture.

Think of a culture that has developed four different languages, each with a prescribed purpose. The Xenth, who wear formal clothing and have precise traditions about who may have windows and who may not, who may look to the left and who may not, have but one language, without much more complexity than most human languages. Twenty-eight letters, millions of words, a simple sentence structure followed in infinite variations.

But the Quurzod, who wear little to no clothing, and have windows everywhere, and few walls in their homes, the Quurzod divide the world with their language. Language is forbidden to some, and embraced by others.

Language is not just for communicating, but also for protection. Protection of the culture, protection of the family, protection of the Quurzod traditions, whatever they might be. And whatever they might be, they are precious to the Quurzod.

In my excitement to learn, I forgot about strictures and structures and barriers. I forgot that language conceals as well as reveals. I forgot that protections exist for a reason. And I forgot what it is like to be young and curious and different from everyone else.

I forgot.

I grew up in a culture that embraces difference, celebrates diversity, and loves outsiders. A culture that believes itself superior to all others, yes, but in an open-minded way, a way that allows curiosity, a way that states the more we learn, the better we are.

I forgot that not everyone sees the universe as broadly as we do.

I forgot that not everyone has seen the universe.

I forgot that not everyone is *allowed* to see the universe.

When we finally get to our private conference room, I tell Leona that she no longer has to defend me. I caused the crisis with the Quurzod. I should have been left behind.

I should have been left to die.

She wants me to explain that, and I do, because I owe her that much. I explain, but haltingly. I do not want to slip into the memories again. But someone has to understand. Someone has to know. Besides me.

Children absorb language. They are born without it, but with the capacity to learn it. Some lose that capacity as they age, or let it atrophy or never really had a great capacity for it at all. But others never lose the ability to absorb language, and consequently, they crave more and more of it.

They want to learn—or maybe they need to learn.

I have always needed to learn. Sounds and syntax are like symphonies to me, and as much as I love the old symphonies, I am always searching for new ones.

Klaaynch needed to learn too. And if all I had done was teach her Standard, we would have been fine. But she wanted to teach me the glories of Quurzid—all of Quurzid—and I wanted to learn.

She might have gotten away with teaching me some familial Quurzid. She was right; no one could choose her friends for her.

But street Quurzid—it was beautiful and complex and revealing, a culture in and of itself, one that revered violence and anger as a way of life. Each word had degrees of meaning depending on how it fell in a sentence, as well as what tone the speaker used (High, low? Soft, loud? Quick, slow?), and each meaning had nuances as well. Street Quurzid was one of those languages that would take weeks to learn and a lifetime to understand.

I was thinking that after I completed my mission as the linguistic diplomat at the peace conference between the Xenth and Quurzod, I would stay on Ukhanda and study street Quurzid. I would spend the rest of my life immersed in the most complex language I had ever heard.

Maybe I mentioned that to someone. Maybe I had merely thought it. Maybe my intentions were clear to people whose language was so complex that my language must have seemed like a child's first halting sentences.

I don't know.

What I do know is this. I convinced Klaaynch to take me to one of the violence pools—a gathering site where the Quurzod train. They live in those places, not in their homes, not in their streets, not in their restaurants or their places of business, but in their violence pools.

Violence pools are little mobile communities. They exist as long as they need to. If they get discovered by outsiders, they move.

Small buildings, assembled out of sticks and cloth, appear, then disappear as needed. They form a circle around a flattened area, and in that flattened area, lessons happen.

Most of the lessons are in things we consider illegal. How to kill someone with a wide variety of weaponry. How to kill someone with sticks. How to kill someone with fists alone. These are not military lessons, which we also provide, but lessons in survival.

Quurzid, for all its complexity, does not seem to have a word for "murder."

Lessons here are proprietary. Outsiders cannot see them. I did not observe the violence pool during lessons, although I heard about them. The worst, according to Klaaynch, were the defensive lessons. Because if you failed, you would get injured. If you had trouble learning why you failed, you would get injured in the same way repeatedly. If you flinched as someone came at you after you had already been injured once, you were taken off the roster until your psyche healed. If you flinched again after your return, you were relegated to non-violent work—talking, writing, science, mathematics—all of which were seen as inferior.

Klaaynch's dream of being a linguist was considered odd, and it *was* odd, for the Quurzod. The only thing that saved her, the only thing that gave her any kind of power and potential, was her ability to fight.

She was considered the best of her generation.

And she proved it.

It took her four hours to die.

I know because I watched.

It was the only time I had been allowed in an actual violence pool during fighting. I sat behind Klaaynch and her team. We sat there, all except the two who escaped. Klaaynch and her young team. Me and mine. Twenty-three lives from the ship, lives I wasted in my attempt to learn the wrong form of Quurzid. Awnings attached to the small buildings shaded us, but the air was hot—hotter than anything I had ever experienced—and dry.

The Quurzod gave us water. They gave us something to keep our fluids balanced. They wanted us to live—at least until the fighting ended.

I was not allowed to speak, and I did not.

Around me, Quurzod I had met—most in their teens, some barely adult—fought for their very survival.

But the match that mattered was Klaaynch's.

It took four hours for their best fighters to kill her. A dozen adults against one thin girl. Four hours.

If she had survived for six hours, she would have lived and been granted favors. One of the favors she wanted was to get permission for me to study street Quurzid.

Not the violence pools themselves.

Just street Quurzid.

And while I did that, she wanted me to teach her Standard. Standard, and all of the other languages I knew.

She was so marvelous. So strong. So brave. So beautiful.

But three hours and forty-five minutes in, someone snapped her right femur. She kept fighting, but she had no base, no way to maintain her balance. At three hours and fifty-eight minutes, she fell.

It took only two minutes to finish her off. The others in her violence pool, those who had been contaminated by me, died that afternoon as well.

The fighters dismantled the buildings. Beneath the largest was the pool itself. A hollow, empty pit in the ground, designed to hold the losers of any large fight.

Klaaynch had told me this as we waited for the others to show up. She told me that the pools often were not used, and when the time came to move the violence pool, the actual pool itself got filled.

This one got filled too.

With us.

Most of my team fought back. When it became clear that we would die, they fought. But they were no match for the Quurzod.

They went into the pool. Then me, then Klaaynch's friends.

And finally, Klaaynch.

No one touched me, except to knock me unconscious. It should have been enough to kill me. In the heat, among the dead, in the dryness.

I should have died.

But I did not.

To her credit, Leona does not speak as I tell my story. She tries to keep her face expressionless, but she cannot control her eyes. They narrow, they widen. Several times, she keeps them closed for a few extra seconds, as if she does not want to look at me any more.

I don't want to look at me either.

"The other two, they were right," I say. "I caused this. I'm why we're here. Be-calmmed."

Leona does not nod. Nor does she reach out a hand to comfort me. She sighs. "They abandoned their post."

They did. They left the Quurzod as the rest of us went to the violence pool. They should have stayed with us, but they thought something might go wrong and they fled.

I should have told the others to go as well. The mistake was mine, not theirs.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "I shouldn't be here."

"The captain decides that," she says. "He brought you back."

"When he didn't have all of the information," I say.

She inclines her head. She is conceding that point.

"Tell him I'm ready. He can't send me back, but he shouldn't keep me here either."

"You're volunteering for execution?" she asks.

"It's the right thing," I say.

"I don't think that's your decision," she says. "Not any more."

They return me to my quarters. The apartment no longer looks like mine. I recognize everything in it, I even remember hanging the quilt, scrunching the blanket on my divan, but the place feels strange to me, like a memory that I have abandoned. The apartment has a dusty odor, as if I've been gone for months, which is impossible. First of all, I have not been gone more than a few days, and secondly, the air gets recycled in here. Nothing should smell of dust.

I make myself dinner and sit in one of the chairs to eat it. Normally, I would play a language quiz or watch an entertainment, but I do neither. I sit and listen.

The Quurzod whisper all around me. The sound infects me, like the memories infected me. The memories are there, but I no longer slip into them accidentally. Instead, I roll them around in my mind, worrying them, like my tongue would worry a chipped tooth.

No wonder I blocked them. All those people, dead because of me. Because I did not understand—when I am trained to understand.

I should have known. I should have figured it out.

And I did not.

Not even when Klaaynch said to me that she could choose her own friends. When she said it with defiance, with that glow the rebellious get as they anticipate a fight.

If the Quurzod so strongly protect the language they use for family and friends, it should have seemed obvious to me that they would viciously defend the language they strove to keep secret. I should have known—maybe I did know—of course I knew.

And that is why I blocked the memories. I didn't want to remember that feeling—that I'll-deal-with-it-later feeling—the one I ignored.

I have been sitting with my plate in my lap for nearly an hour when the door chime sounds. Coop's chime. It does not surprise me. A part of me has expected to see him all along.

He looks big, powerful, as he comes through that door. His presence is almost too much for the room.

"Leona tells me you volunteered for execution." He does not sit. He towers over me. "I won't do it."

"It's regulation." I clutch the plate. I have not really moved, except that my muscles have tensed.

"Regulation is what the captain says it is," he says.

I shake my head slightly. "If that were true, each ship would be a tiny dictatorship."

He sits on the divan across from me, balancing on the edge, leaning toward me. "It's not like you to give up."

I look at him. When we met, I predicted the lines that formed around his eyes. But the one that furrows his brow is a surprise; he frowns more than I would have ever expected.

"I haven't given up," I say. Even when I should have. I'm the one who caused this, not him. I'm the one who didn't die in that pit. I'm the one who climbed out—over bodies, over people I knew. I'm the one who staggered through that desert, to the borders where I knew the Xenth would find me. I'm the one who made it to that village, against all odds. I did not give up. And I should have.

"You haven't thought it through," he says. "They tricked us."

I blink, frown, then get up. I walk the plate to the recycling unit. If I don't eat that food, someone else should get the nutrients.

"They didn't trick me," I say with my back to him. "I went to that violence pool of my own free will."

"Not the Quurzod," he says. "The Xenth."

I turn. I didn't deal with the Xenth. Most of the negotiations with the Xenth happened before I was brought into the discussions.

I am suddenly cold.

He's looking at his hands. "They tricked all of us."

I walk back and sit down. I wait.

He raises his head. Those lines, those sad eyes.

"Think about it," he says. "The imbalance of power that has existed there for centuries. Then, one day, a fleet of ships arrives, a fleet with more power than the Xenth can imagine. And we offer to help."

He twists his hands together. He has thought of this for a long time.

"They ask the initial negotiators, they say—"

"*If we ask you to obliterate the Quurzod, you would do so?*" I whisper this in Xenth. I have read the documentation. They did say that, and the initial negotiators wrote it off as a test.

I believed the initial negotiators. After all, they're the ones on the ground. They watch body language. They know the culture—or should know the culture. They're

the ones who understand what is going on. Besides, the Xenth's question wasn't unusual. Every culture we encounter wants to know our limits. Our limits are that we help, we do not engage.

Unless we are engaged first.

Coop quotes the line, ignoring my Xenth, which he does not understand. He is used to me muttering in other languages. I have done it as long as he has known me. "We refused to destroy Quurzod. We spent time studying the situation, and then we offered our diplomatic services to the Xenth. But during the time we studied them, the Xenth studied us."

So buttoned up, so formal and proper. Hidden, too, but we should have expected that.

Only that isn't my mistake. I wasn't with the initial group. The initial groups came from elsewhere in the Fleet, and somehow they overcame—or maybe never had—their aversion to the Xenth, and their hissing, sibilant-filled language.

I, on the other hand, never trusted them. But I did trust my commanders. I trusted my orders, figuring they all knew the history, the facts, the personalities of both sides.

"The Xenth knew," Coop says. "They knew about the violence; they've suffered from it. They accused the Quurzod of massacres, not telling us that this was part of Quurzod culture, that they kill anyone—regardless of nationality—if they violate certain rules. The Xenth made sure we did not know those rules. They sent us in blind."

It is so easy to blame another culture. But I shake my head. I believe in mistakes before I believe in deviousness. "That can't be true," I say. "The Xenth left too much to chance."

"They left nothing to chance," he says. "If we had actually figured out a way to negotiate with the Quurzod, the Xenth would have gained a solid border, some defined territory, an end to a long war. But if we did not find a way to negotiate, if we aggravated the Quurzod, then the Quurzod would come after us. They would have *engaged us*—"

"And the Xenth's war would become our war," I say. He's right. The logic is inescapable. It explains my unease. It explains the lack of preparation the Fleet's diplomatic team gave to my team. The Fleet's team was tricked.

I don't usually believe in the duplicity of other cultures, but this is too big a mistake to miss—at least on the part of the Xenth. And I understand the Fleet's diplomacy well enough to know that had we understood the extreme violence of the Quurzod, no one would have sent my team in unprotected.

"The Xenth's war did become our war," Coop says. "Only the rest of the Fleet fights it while we wait here."

"We don't know if they're fighting it," I say.

He stares at me. We know. They're fighting it. And while the Quurzod are fierce on the ground, they are no match for the Fleet in space.

The Quurzod will fight brilliantly, like Klaaynch did. And then the Fleet will destroy something important, destroy the Quurzod's balance.

And they will die within minutes, leaving the Xenth to fill the void.

Without us, the Fleet will think they have done the right thing.

I look at Coop. He smiles, just a little, hesitant, more the boy I remember than the man he is.

"If you knew all of this," I say, "why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me stay locked in here, with the doubts and the memories?"

"I suspected," he says. "I had no proof. I just knew you, and your core, and how you would never, ever betray any of us. Nor would you knowingly jeopardize children."

"They weren't really children," I say softly.

"They weren't yet adults either," he said.

I nod. I will always carry them—the twenty-three members of my team, and the dozen young friends of Klaaynch, and Klaaynch herself. They died for my curiosity, for my ever-solid core.

"It would've been easier if you executed me," I say softly.

He puts his hands over mine. His hands are warm. He says, "Anyone who commands lives with these moments."

I shudder. "But I'm done. I've made my mistake. I should have known—"

"No," he says. "The mistake wasn't yours. In fact, you have done the one thing that might help us."

"What's that?" I ask.

"You learned street Quurzid."

I shake my head. "I don't know street Quurzid. I know as much street Quurzid as the first contact team knows when it goes into a new situation. A phrase here and there, nothing more."

"That's not what your memory says. Your memory knows street Quurzid. You might not be able to speak it, but you have enough of it to help us."

I want to pull my hands from his. I never want to go near street Quurzid again.

"How?" I ask.

"When we get back, you can tell the Quurzod in all of their languages how we both got betrayed."

"And have them destroy the Xenth?" I am appalled.

"Yes," he says so softly that I can barely hear him. This is not the idealistic man I met on *Brazza*. This man is ruthless, utterly ruthless.

"But the Quurzod, they're horrible people," I say.

He studies me.

I wait, but tap my finger ever so slightly. I have lost the gift of patience somewhere. It vanished in that desert.

"You're confusing their culture with ours," he says.

I flush. I used to say that to him. So young. So idealistic. I would say, *One culture cannot judge another until they have a deep understanding of all parts of the culture.*

*Including the language*, he would say, his eyes sparkling.

*And the history, and the things that have developed that culture. Just because they have evolved a tradition that we disagree with doesn't make our position right.*

"It's not the same," I say.

"It is," he says.

"The Quurzod *murder* each other," I say.

"So do we," he says. "You asked me to murder you."

"I asked you to execute me, according to our laws."

He waits. Dammit, he has the patience now.

He waits.

He has made his point.

My shoulders slump. We know each other well enough that he understands my capitulation without my verbal acknowledgement.

"I need you to master street Quurzid," he says.

"I don't know enough of it," I say.

"Then do your best," he says. "You need to become the expert in Quurzid. Then you need to figure out how to teach our people the language."

"Not just those on the *Ivoire*," I say.

"I want a plan of instruction, something recorded, so that all of the ships in the Fleet can learn it," he says. "I want us to be ready as soon as someone hears our distress call. I want to be able to end the fighting around Ukhanda immediately."

His hands are still around mine. He shakes, just a little, as he says that.

"You think we'll get out of this, then?" I ask.

"Are you asking if we'll be becalmed forever?"

I nod.

"No," he says.

"But you put us on rations," I say.

"It might be a week," he says. "It might be a year. I want to be prepared."

"The Quurzod damaged the *anacapa* drive, didn't they?"

"While we were engaging it," he says. "It'll take some time to figure out what exactly went wrong. That's why I need you."

"Me?"

He nods, and his hands tighten around mine. "I need you to figure out what's wrong with the communications array. I'm convinced our distress signals aren't getting through."

I flush, then let out a small breath. "You trust me to get back to work?"

His gaze meets mine. "Mae," he says, "I've trusted you all along."

He has. He's been the only one. I didn't even trust myself.

I bow my head, stunned at his faith in me. Stunned that I still have a future.

He stands, puts his hands on my shoulders, and kisses the top of my head.

"Welcome back," he whispers.

I lean into him for just a moment.

"It's good to be back," I say, with more relief than I expected, and resist the urge to add, *You have no idea how good it is.*

Because I have a hunch he does know, and that's why he didn't leave me behind.

Because I am still part of the ship. A necessary part of the ship.

And you never abandon the necessities. No matter how difficult it is to retrieve them. O

## Black Hole

With gravity compounding like a destiny,  
The walnut shells of stars succumb and crack,  
Scattering dust mote embers big as galaxies,  
Down the cosmic rabbit hole with no way back.

Does some song lure them to the blazing rim,  
Or is it fascination with the black abyss  
A love song is it, or a funeral hymn,  
That promises a world more bright than this?

The crowning glory of what stars might be,  
Of endless light without the intervening dark.  
What irresistible dominion do they see  
Before they fling themselves down that last arc?

A final flare, a last epiphany before they're gone,  
A twinkling light for some small child to wish  
upon.

—William John Watkins

# NEXT ISSUE

## JUNE ISSUE

June's blockbuster cover story is a novella from John W. Campbell Award-winning author **Mary Robinette Kowal**. Follow homicide detectives Scott Huang and his AI partner Metta as they attempt to prevent another murder. The stakes are high and the detectives have to move fast if they're going to save something that may be even more precious than life. You're sure to be captivated by Metta, who can customize her interface for each officer, but who chooses to be a certain silver screen starlet for Huang.

## ALSO IN JUNE

In addition to this nearly novel-length tale, we've managed to cram five other stories into the same issue. **Ian R. MacLeod**'s novelette combines a near balletic sense of the martial arts with the harsh reality of "The Cold Step Beyond"; **Carol Emshwiller** explores what it's like to grow up knowing only "All the News That's Fit"; in his first story for *Asimov's*, **Alan DeNiro** takes us on a unique road trip, one that our heroes might survive if they can get past "The Walking Stick Fires"; **Colin P. Davies** returns with a short story both funny and poignant about the last hours in the life of a "Fighter"; and **Felicity Shoulders** explores the corporate world of fighters and survivors who must all play the "Apocalypse Daily."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg**'s "Reflections" column reminds us that there's "Nothing New Under the Sun"; **James Patrick Kelly**'s "On the Net" lets us know what's "Fantastic" about some modern FanFic; **Peter Heck** contributes "On Books"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at newsstands on April 5, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle, *BarnesandNoble.com*'s Nook, and *ebookstore.sony.com*'s eReader!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Paul Cornell**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Ken Liu**, **Kit Reed**, **Norman Spinrad**, **Felicity Shoulders**, **Chris Beckett**, **Eleanor Arnason**, **Bruce McAllister**, **Robert Reed**, **Theodora Goss**, **Neal Barrett, Jr.**, **Will Ludwigsen**, and many others!

## Urbi et Orbi

## THE CITY AND THE CITY

by China Miéville

Ballantine/Del Rey, \$15

978-0345497529

## KRAKEN

by China Miéville

Ballantine/Del Rey, \$26

978-0345497499

## THE DERVISH HOUSE

by Ian McDonald

Pyr, \$26

978-1616142049

## ARES EXPRESS

by Ian McDonald

Pyr, \$16

978-1616141974

**N**ot to be insulting, but for those of you who might be baffled by the Latin title, it more or less simply means "the city and the world," or "to the city and the world"—originally the opening line of Roman proclamations, long since adopted by Popes doing likewise. Here I am bending it considerably to mean of the city and the world; in speculative fiction terms, science fiction and fantasy alike, fiction in which a fictional city or a fictional world is one way or another as much a central character as any of the humans (or non-humans) inhabiting it.

"World building" in its extended sense of an imagined physical venue for the story has always played a central role in more speculative fiction than not, whether a fictional planet, or a fictional generation starship, or a fictional space habitat, or a fictional city, or a fictional fantasy world, and there are probably those who would contend that it can't be the real deal without it.

But here we have four novels by two of the leading literary lights of the current speculative fiction era—*The City and the City* and *Kraken* by China Miéville, *The Dervish House* and *Ares Express* by Ian McDonald—in which the city in the first three and a fictional Mars in the fourth become as much foreground as the characters embedded in them, and in which even the story line itself, to one degree or another, becomes almost secondary.

And, interestingly enough, both authors—McDonald unintentionally, and Miéville quite overtly—are champions of two drastically divergent streams of speculative fiction, so much so that one might oversimplify them as science fiction and fantasy. Nevertheless in all four of these novels these streams converge on this world-building centrality, albeit in radically different manners.

McDonald writes science fiction. It may, as in *Ares Express*, be so rococo as to have the feeling of fantasy, but however he does it, whatever contortions it may take, he does try to create suspension of disbelief in the traditional science fictional manner, by shoehorning what might otherwise be fantasy into accommodation with the known laws of mass and energy.

Miéville, on the other hand, couldn't care less. He not only writes fantasy, but much of it is written in the mode he has dubbed, and of which he is champion—namely the "New Weird."

*Ares Express*, first published in Britain in 2001, brought to the United States by Pyr in 2010, is a peculiar kind of sequel to McDonald's first novel, *Desolation Road*. That characters are not repeated is not particularly peculiar, that McDonald sets both novels on his version of Mars is not peculiar, for many writers return to further explore a world they

created in one novel in another one—literary recycling, as it were, waste not, want not.

What is peculiar is that it is and is not the same fictional Mars in both novels. Both novels are set on a future terraformed Mars with human cultures spreading all over it, and both McDonald versions of Mars owe much to Ray Bradbury and Jack Vance, which is to say the cultures in question are in their ways as baroque and colorfully realized a bouillabaisse as Vance's *Dying Earth* or Bradbury's own *Martian Chronicles*. But this is Ian McDonald, who even in a first novel took care to make what has the flavor of fantasy fit within the confines of science fictional realism, paying attention to creating a belief in the reader who cares that both his versions of Mars lie within the possible, if not the probable.

But these two literary planets created a decade apart are not the same Mars, not exactly, and the significant differences are mainly literary.

The Mars of *Desolation Road* feels something like Bradbury puffing on a doobie, the love affair of the writer with his dream of a Mars that never was, except maybe in a way in Edgar Rice Burroughs, baroque in style, culturally dense and complex. It's a true novel, not a collection of short stories written over time like *The Martian Chronicles* with consistency not entering into at all, but with a set of interweaving story lines that do form a whole—but which, like the characters, colorful and bizarre though they be, escape the forefront of the reading experience and the memory thereof.

*Ares Express* gives us another baroquely complex stew of arcane local cultures and extreme characters. It is another dream of an improbably terraformed Mars, it does therefore have a certain fantasy feel, but here there is a viewpoint character with centrality and simpatico personal depth. And this McDonald Mars owes quite a bit to steampunk.

Quite literally. Sweetness Octave Glorious-Honeybun Asiim 12, the heroine of the story—and she is a real picaresque

heroine—is a punk to her family, a black sheep runaway wise-girl out to boogie. And her family is a tribe of the engineers who crew the great trains that traverse the surface of the planet, transporting goods, passengers, con artists, and popular culture from one more or less isolated culture to another.

The locomotives may be powered by on-board fusion reactors, but as aesthetic artifacts and Rube Goldberg technology, like most of the rest of the infrastructure and architecture on the surface of the planet until higher forces intrude, they are Victoriana. You can see how it all could work by pushing such technology to its very limits, but if you ask why in hell do it this way, the only answer is aesthetic.

Retro aesthetic. Ian McDonald has managed to write a romance of the rails, a railroad novel with all the trimmings, set on a far future Mars. There certainly is a literary tradition of this sort of thing, and any number of classic films, but you don't see much of it in science fiction, or, for that matter, fantasy. Though, interestingly enough, China Miéville did it too in *Iron Council*, albeit with a razor sharp and iron hard political edge.

There's just a certain allure to trains and railway odysseys for many people, obviously McDonald among them—nor am I immune—or rather to what they once were in the nineteenth century and what they might become again in the future, at least within the pages of a novel.

Trains were adventurous cutting edge transport back in Victorian times, and they were also perambulating hotels of whatever level—or, better, Mississippi riverboats on wheels and running on rails. The look and feel of this pre-auto and pre-airplane technology, like the iron tube bridge across the Firth of Forth in Scotland, as far as you could go without cable suspension technology, seems both quaint and touchingly heroic to our eyes now.

In the nineteenth century, advanced engineering pushing what the engineers had to work with to the very edge of the possible had a heroic romantic allure

that seem archaic to us now, but a romantic allure nonetheless.

This to me seems to be the essential appeal of steampunk. Retro, wistfully heroic, silly maybe, but also sweet.

And no more so than when it comes to locomotives, trains and the rails taking them over the far horizons, especially as when, in *Ares Express*, even whistle stops tend to drop you into yet another exotic dreamscape.

There's a story in *Ares Express* that includes confrontations with Artificial Intelligences and higher forces beyond Mars, dimensions beyond the human realities of the surface. Sweetness runs away from her train, her family, and her culture to flee from an arranged marriage she abhors, embarks on a picaresque journey through a series of more or less fantastically baroque cultures with colorful traveling companions, searching for the grandmother who is searching for her, and later for her lost spectral twin who sort of never was born but sort of lived inside her. This ends up involving her in a war among the entities who terraformed Mars, a malignant Luddite guru with a flying city that's pedaled through the air by his acolytes who wants to bring about some kind of apocalypse, and various forces and persons who love Mars just the way it is.

Sweetness, of course, happens to be entrusted with a mission key to the outcome of this over-arching storyline that McDonald admirably links to her personal tale.

It's coherent, dramatic, and comes to a satisfying conclusion. But for me, at least, it's the locomotive pulling the train of attention through McDonald's richly colorful and richly enjoyable Martian landscape that's central, not only to this one novel, but to this sort of discursive tale in general. As with any well-done discursive novel, and particularly a picaresque railroad journey novel, science fiction or not, the journey is more than half of the fun.

*The Dervish House*, McDonald's latest novel, is quite a different thing in one way, and like *Ares Express* in another.

With *River of Gods* and *Brasyl*, the former set in an India of the much nearer future, and the latter in Brasils of more than one future and the past as well, McDonald showed an almost sui generis genius for extrapolating the futures of non-Euro-American cultures in complex, rich, and telling detail, up to and including semi-imaginary pop cultures extrapolated seamlessly from the ones presently current.

But even so, in these novels, story and character, not the imagined worlds, are more front and center, the enjoyment of the less discursive magical mystery tour icing on the cake, as it were. And in *The Dervish House*, McDonald sets out to do the same sort of thing for a future Turkey—more explicitly, for the city of Istanbul.

Indeed, the novel is set just about entirely in greater Istanbul, though what more or less turns out to be the central plot of *The Dervish House*, or at least the major one, revolves around events that take place in the natural gas fields of Central Asia. There are three plots here, coming together, or, better, radiating out from, *The Dervish House* of the title, an old Sufi ashram-cum-communal-dwelling, now turned into a rather seedy apartment compound, where the paths of the characters, some of them a bit seedy themselves, cross and intersect.

But the novel might just as well, and certainly more accurately and simply, have been called *Istanbul*. For the city itself is front, center, and dominant, its millennial history alive and meddling in its fictional future, its living folklores, its place as the capital of the most populous and most recent member of the European Union, its diverse, volatile, and dangerously divergent mix of Shia, Sunni, Christian, Jewish, Byzantine, Greek, European Turkish, and Anatolian Turkish cultures.

Once again, McDonald makes his imagined future world, his imagined future city, exhaustingly real, vibrantly alive, his Istanbul, for in *The Dervish House*, you can feel his deep emotional connection to his semi-fictional city.

When it comes to the main characters and the plots, that is, the multiplex story lines, it's a bit of a muddle.

The most deeply felt character, perhaps, is a boy with a strange heart condition that makes loud noise life threatening. He has robot cloud toys that metamorphose and move at his electronic command and form his main connection to the wider world outside the Dervish House.

There's an art dealer pursuing an ancient body preserved in honey, which becomes a kind of vision quest, and her wheeling and double dealing lover, a market trader wizard setting up the dirty deal of a lifetime.

There's a character who unwillingly becomes able to see djinn, a faded one-time star economist with an old tragic love story, and so forth, with a cast of well-rendered minor characters.

But the over-arching story line revolves around a complex swindle scheme concerning Central Asian gas, and the subplots do more or less converge upon it formally. There is and are formally satisfying denouements.

But while the story lines don't really come off as perfunctory structure, the main line in particular is so deliberately complex a futures market scam that it becomes rather over-complex for gripping dramatic involvement, and the human characters less vivid and deeply felt by the reader, and one suspects by the writer, than Istanbul itself.

Geography, folklore, climate, weather, history, politics, food, ancient religion, future pop culture, slang, tech, the media sphere—it's all there, as in *River of Gods* and *Brasyl*. But in *The Dervish House* the centrality of the extrapolated city is almost defiantly front and center. Istanbul is the main character here, and McDonald makes no bones about it.

To quote the very last lines of the last paragraph of the novel, where McDonald comes entirely up front about it:

This is the secret name of God, written across Istanbul in letters too great and yet too small to be comprehended. This is the stir of djinn and remember-

ings, which are not as different as humans think, in the twilight of Adem Dede Square, outside the old dervish house. This is the turn, this is the whirl, this is the dance that is woven into every particle of the universe. This is the laughter of Hizir the Green Saint. This is Istanbul, Queen of Cities, and she will endure as long as human hearts beat upon the earth.

This is a love poem to a city.

China Miéville's *Kraken* is also a kind of love poem to a city, if not an unambiguous one—a more or less contemporary London transmogrified but not quite transformed by the New Weird. *The City and the City* is all about an entirely imaginary city or cities somewhere and somewhere in literary Central European Ruritania, bordered on both real contemporary European countries and the outer reaches of the Twilight Zone, one city but also two interpenetrating cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma.

But these two city novels, written more or less one after the other, superficially similar in thumbnail description, are radically different.

*The City and the City* is a strange, tautly written, and not overlong novel, a cross between fantasy and the police procedural that works and works very well. Its first person narrator is Inspector Tyador Borlu of the Beszel Extreme Crime Squad, and the plot is a murder mystery, which expands into political macro-consequences, and which forces him to work across the border with an Ul Qoman detective.

Thus far, from such a thumbnail description, it would seem that this is a novel that simply combines a few well-worn genre templates—the police procedural; what the French call the roman noir, the sort of thing written by writers like Raymond Chandler; the murder mystery in which the murder proves to have political consequences beyond homicide; and the Ruritainian novel of the nineteenth century that takes place somewhere in a nonexistent middle European city drenched in then-exotic atmosphere.

But Beszel and Ul Qoma are and are not the same city, and the frontier between them is not a line on a map but something conceptual. This is a concept so difficult to fathom—and, I would guess, by Miéville's deliberate intent—that even the inhabitants themselves don't all get its metaphysical complexity, and no one knows who created it or why.

Beszel and Ul Qoma are interpenetrating cities that occupy the same geographic space but not the same political and psychic space, and we are not talking here about "alternate realities." Buildings, neighborhoods, and even government edifices exist in either Beszel or Ul Qoma. Citizens of each city are supposed to "not-see" the buildings and people in the other. Streets and highways run through both cities, but the automobile traffic on them deliberately "not-sees" the other city's vehicles, though if necessary drivers do to avoid collisions.

Not seeing the other city has to be a deliberate act of will, because in physical terms everyone in both of them can see everyone and, everything in the other. This bizarre frontier is called the Breach, and being purely conceptual, has no physical existence. It is entirely conceptual and non-linear, but violating it and crossing over is a grave crime in both cities.

The integrity of the Breach is policed and guarded by a mysterious group also called the Breach. Their authority is absolute, and they appear more or less literally from nowhere to arrest violators and whisk them off to no one knows what end or where.

The Breach may or may not be the original creators of this set-up that no one seems to know who, why, or even when it came into being. It is the question the archaeologist, who is the murder victim McGuffin, was trying to solve.

And that being the setup and this being the kind of novel that it is, that is as far as I should go, rather than enter into the plot complexities that are the engine of any good detection thriller. In *The City and the City* Borlu is very much front and center, being the first person nar-

ator and an interesting and simpatico one despite himself. This is a noir detective tradition, and this being in form a noir detective novel, so is the plot.

But *The City and the City* is more than a noir detective novel, much more, though exactly what more remains complex and elusive. China Miéville is a writer who enjoys world-building, and a thoroughly urban one—just how urban we shall see in *Kraken*—and the two interpenetrating cities are far from just being necessary setting. Miéville imbues them with just the kind of Victorian eastern European noir atmosphere of nineteenth century Ruritania, non-existent, conjured out of imagination, but somehow not a fantasyland at all.

*The City and the City* is a different novel from what Miéville had done before, at least for adults, and a successful one, and certainly weird. But not "New Weird" at all as I've just come to understand the concept, or think I have after seeing the film *Inception*.

*Inception* is a story about a mercenary operative and his crew who enter the dreams of targets to either mine them for the targets' secrets or implant false memories to cause the reaction commissioned by the client. So far, so good. The hero (or anti-hero) has a good psychological reason for doing what he does, and the story line that takes him through at least the first half of the movie or so is coherent and interesting.

But the story then degenerates into an FX orgy of endless combat sequences, car chases, explosions, action cliffhangers, and so forth, which take place within dreamscapes where anything that can be visualized with FX technology goes—and with modern computer FX technology that means just about anything you can, uh, dream up and have the budget to afford. Not only do the laws of mass and energy as we know them not apply, there are no alternate ones either. Worse still, this massively overlong thud and blunder denouement takes place in three intercut dreams interacting arbitrarily and pretty much incoherently.

This has been a powerful cinematic trend the past few years, spawned by the success of *The Matrix*, which takes place entirely within nested matryoshka doll realities, nightmare dreamscapes for the most part where everything goes in the service of directorial slow-motion FX derring-do.

Movies as superhero action comics.

No rules of mass, energy, motion, or even magic.

At least in cinematic terms, this is the New Weird.

Fantasy for sure, but not fantasy as we have known it.

And in literary terms, likewise *Kraken*, a novel that would seem to make the theoretical and rhetorical concept of the New Weird concretely clear, for better and for worse.

Back in the day, the critic Alexi Panshin wrote about “science fiction that knows it’s science fiction,” meaning a purely literary game, fantasy of a kind, where the created reality more or less operates under the known laws of mass and energy when they don’t get in the way of the tale, but which stretches them with as much rubbery science as needed when they do to suspend disbelief.

Or to render the question of belief or disbelief irrelevant, since the writer and the reader acknowledge to themselves that it’s all a purely literary game. Gregory Benford called this “science fiction as tennis played with the net down,” meaning ignoring the rules of scientific consensus reality; true enough as far as it goes, but what it really means is science fiction played by a different set of rules selected by the writer for literary purposes. Science fiction as a kind of consensus fantasy reality.

Out of this evolved the “New Space Opera” swamps on Venus, canals on Mars, faster than light starships, the good old stuff that everyone now knows does not and cannot really exist, but that makes for good ripping tales. Space opera settings and tropes as a form of science fiction that knows that it’s really fantasy.

But fantasy, like the New Space Opera, which is a subset of fantasy, must establish a set of rules for the specific literary universe in question in order to be dramatically satisfying—the rules of its brand of magic, as it were—and the reader must more or less understand what they are as close to the onset as possible. Otherwise, it’s the old “with a mighty effort the hero leaped out of the pit” whenever the writer feels like pulling a *deus ex machina* rabbit out of his hat. And it’s damn hard, if not impossible, to create and maintain dramatic tension, which is to say, among other things, tell an emotionally involving story.

Or not?

The literary New Weird, like the cinematic New Weird, seems to deny all that. It might better be called the New Fantasy, because that’s what it is—fantasy unlike what has gone before, not fantasy as we have known it.

*Kraken* is set in a contemporary London, at least timewise, and it is clear that China Miéville, a true Londoner, loves the city he inhabits, which is therefore his own even more deeply than Ian McDonald loves his Istanbul for the duration of a novel. One can’t help thinking of another born and bred Londoner, Michael Moorcock, presently in exile, and his own ode to the city, *Mother London*.

Same geographical locus, same emotional attachment, roughly the same timeframe from a temporally detached enough perspective, but not the same London.

Miéville, like Moorcock, loves London for its time-deep and verdigris-overgrown historical and folklorical roots, its sense of heroic muddling through whatever, its richly mazelike cityscape, its somewhat decayed grandeur, its eternal proletarian and lumpenproletarian subcultures, and so forth. But there the similarities end.

The London of *Kraken* is a magical London, a fantasyland, though not at all a Disney version, and the main story line is one Billy Harrow’s magical mystery tour through it, starting as a kind of

police procedural at the more or less quotidian surface and delving stepwise down, down, down (or up, up, up, if you prefer) into its hidden magical deeps.

Billy is a curator in the Natural History Museum, and the novel begins with the seemingly impossible disappearance of the body of a giant squid, the kraken of the title, from its preservation tank. Initially, at least, he is both a possible suspect for a crime that couldn't have happened but did, and an expert on the disappeared McGuffin, "assisting the police in their inquiries," as the British cops genteelly put it, in more ways than one. The story unwinds, exfoliates, and expands from there.

I suppose I must attempt to summarize the story as best I can. No easy task, since in plot detail, I found it damn hard to follow—not that there isn't detail in literally overwhelming profusion.

That's the problem.

Billy Harrow is a well-rendered and simpatico character who matures and grows during the length of the novel from a kind of hapless and clueless naïf into a main player. Yet, the game he becomes so deeply involved in—to save the world from the apocalypse, or at least to save London—is never quite clear.

Indeed, there are at least two apocalypse candidates in *Kraken*, maybe even more; at least two and maybe more mutually hostile giant squid-worshiping sects; a semi-personified spirit of the sea; magical gangsters; paranormal cops; the ka of a long-dead ancient Egyptian constrained to flit forever from statue to statue; and more minor players than I can count or quite remember involved in this sub-surface struggle to bring about one apocalypse or another, or prevent them all.

Not that there's anything inherently wrong with this. In fact, chapter by chapter, scene by scene, line by line, there are riches to enjoy. The Egyptian ka is the leader of a striking union of wizards' stooges and magicians' flunkies, themselves a vast array of creatures and spirits. The leader of the gangsters is a talk-

ing tattoo, a kind of semi-material loa on the back of a human horse. The walls have ears. The ears have walls. One pictures China Miéville chortling with glee as he writes this stuff.

The problem is not the profusion of magicks and magical creatures and beings—as witness, for example, what Jack Vance has done with his *Dying Earth* books, or Ray Bradbury with *The Martian Chronicles*, or the J.K. Rowling with the Harry Potter books, or *The Odyssey* for that matter.

That is not the "New Weird" per se. It's just fantasy. It's at least as old as Homer, older maybe. When it works, it's great fun, and sometimes great literature. And page by page, chapter by chapter, schtick by schtick, *Kraken* is great fun. And a bit more than that, a bit of a political edge and passion beneath and within the schick that is never entirely absent from Miéville's novels.

But *Kraken* doesn't quite satisfy as a whole. After finishing it, one finds oneself wondering what was really going on. With a certain dry wit, French intellectuals have been known to proclaim "It works in practice, but will it work in theory?" The New Weird works quite reasonably in theory, but *Kraken* demonstrates that the theory can create problems in practice even for a writer as puissant as China Miéville.

Perhaps especially for a writer as puissant as China Miéville.

*Kraken* begins coherently enough as a mystery—who stole the squid and how was it possible—and metamorphoses into a kind of mystical mystery quest. So far, so good. But then Miéville starts throwing the schtick.

One squid worshiping cult—hey, why not another? Why not an apostate from the first one, one mystical explication (or anti-explication) of what's behind the veil of the main line of the story, and another, and another? Do we need a main-line of the story? Maybe not—why not have several of them intercepting each other at harmonic points in the manner of a musical fugue? Do we really need

neat and clear harmonic points? Isn't there such a thing as atonal music? Does the reader really have to ever understand all of what's going on?

Didn't Aleister Crowley proclaim that "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law"?

That, at least to me, is the haiku version of the central theoretical principle of the New Weird. Why should writers be bound by anything but the outer limits of their own imaginations? Why should fantasy be bound by pseudo-mimetic realism? Why not take the reader beyond even a consistent fantasy reality? It's all imaginary anyway, so why should fictional magic have any rules? Why restrain yourself at all?

Boys just wanna have fun.

Miéville starts throwing schtick for its own sake, and he certainly seems to be having fun, and fun shtick it is. Creatures of every form, every unnatural origin, every ectoplasmic existence, beings, magicks, satirical piss-takes, metaphorical political rapier thrusts, monsters in clown clothing, descending like a glittery snowfall of the unfettered imagination, as if Miéville had both hands in a bottomless literary toybox and was gleefully tossing its contents into the air, to the point where you wouldn't be surprised if the fabled kitchen sink itself came hurtling down through the cloud of deus ex machinas into which any coherent story line eventually dissolves.

Write what thou wilt shall be the liberation from all laws!

Welcome to the New Weird.

But there's a practical problem with the New Weird, at least as exemplified by *Kraken*, which is entirely absent from *The City and the City*, which, as I hope I've made clear, is a much weirder novel, and an entirely successful one.

*The City and the City* takes place in entirely fictional cities adrift somewhere in Ruritania and enthralled by their own bizarre ideology to the point where truly weird theory creates their really weird interpenetrating existence.

Really weird but consistent.

*Kraken* doesn't have any consistent literary reality where, while you don't know what comes next, you do know that it's not going to contradict the set-ups of what has gone before. *Kraken* drops new beings, new magical realities, new possible explanations of what has gone before all along the story line. Miéville keeps mutating what he's been building up to at many turns in the plot and going off on tangents.

The problem is that you can't really tell a story this way, because a coherent story can't exist without some internal ground rules. You can't drop in another deus ex machina of whatever kind amuses you at the literary moment whenever you please and still have a real story, because if anything is possible, nothing is impossible, and if nothing is impossible at any moment, there can't be dramatic tension. And there can't be a real story without dramatic tension of some kind.

Well, what if you don't want to be bound by the dramatic theorizing of a bunch of dead Greek males? Does a novel really need a story? Maybe not. Many highly enjoyable novels and even some great ones—*Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Flounder*, *Naked Lunch*, etc.—are so discursive that any coherent story line through them gets lost in the deep background of the literary three ring circus.

So okay, maybe you can write a successful novel where any dramatic story is nonexistent or incidental if it's just entertaining or at least involving on a page-by-page level. But I would still contend that you need at the very least some kind of rules of literary engagement—there has to be an overall set-up in which the events take place.

Pardon me or not for using my own stuff as an explanatory example, but the most recent novel I've written, *Welcome to Your Dreamtime*, would seem to be a clear one. As the title itself proclaims, it all takes place in dreams. And as it hints, you yourself, the readers, not a fictional character, are the dreamers. No consistent story line. Not even a single character other than the reader. And we

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all know from personal experience that there are no rules of anything at all in the Dreamtime.

We all know that our dreams are New Weird fantasies to the max. But what is, is real, and we all dream. So we all also know that dreams are real phenomena, contained by the reality of our existence, fantasy contained within science fiction, from a literary viewpoint.

Which is enough to bring something like *Welcome to Your Dreamtime* together, if that paradox can be turned into a set-up. Which I did with a piece of science fiction tech that allows dreams to be written and produced like movies and sold to you, the reader, on dreamchips or downloads.

And that was enough to turn a series of dreams independent of any internal rules into a book that was not just a collection of previously published stories, but a real novel that told the story not of any characters at all but of the rise of a

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new medium from schlock to a true art form, and a certain distance beyond.

Okay, so maybe I am more hardcore in critical theory than in literary practice. But I would still contend that the New Weird could learn something from the history of western painting, which went from realistic mimesis of realistic subject matter to the hyperealistic renderings of things impossible by the Surrealists, to the freedom from any attempt at mimesis at all of the Cubists, to the total disconnect from anything other than its existence as paint on canvas of the Abstract Expressionists, which in retrospect now seems to have been a path better not followed, an evolutionary dead end.

Give me Dali and Magritte and or even Frida Kahlo or Diego Rivera over Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollack.

Give me *The City and the City* over *Kraken*.

Give me a New Surrealism over a New Weird. O

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

In March and April, I'll be at LunaCon, RavenCon and ICon. Other good bets for Asimovians then are StellarCon, FogCon, Potlatch, FantaSciCon, MidSouthCon, AggieCon and MiniCon (and LepreCon in May). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an S.A.S.E. (self-addressed, stamped 10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill 22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## MARCH 2011

4-6—StellarCon. For info, write: 123 Main St., Greensboro NC 27413. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). (E-mail) [info@stellarcon.org](mailto:info@stellarcon.org). Con will be held in: High Point NC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Best Western. Guests will include: Todd McCaffrey, Larry Elmore, Larry Correa, Rich Sigfrit, Jackie Cassada, Nicky Rea, Bill the Mann.

4-6—Potlatch. [potlatch-stf.org](http://potlatch-stf.org). Domain, Sunnyvale CA. Written speculative fiction; special theme: G. R. Stewart's "Earth Abides."

4-6—Wild Wild West Con. (623) 237-3663. [wildwildwestcon.com](http://wildwildwestcon.com). Tucson AZ. The movie and TV show, and steampunk generally.

10-13—EPICon. [epic-conference.com](http://epic-conference.com). Williamsburg VA. "Electronically Published Internet Connection." E-publishing conference.

11-13—FogCon. [fogcon.org](http://fogcon.org). Holiday Inn Golden Gateway, San Francisco CA. Pat Murphy, Jeff Vandermeer. "The City in SF"

11-13—RevelCon. [severalunlimited.com](http://severalunlimited.com). Houston TX. Relax-a-con for fans of adult media fanzines.

11-13—ConJour. [conjour.net](http://conjour.net). Houston TX. Jody Lynn Nye, P. L. Blair. Gaming emphasis.

11-13—AniidaCon. [aniida.webs.com](http://aniida.webs.com). Airport Holiday Inn, Boise ID. Michael Coleman, Tiffany Grant. "East Bound and Down." Anime.

11-13—CoastCon. [coastcon.org](http://coastcon.org). Biloxi MS. Jeff Dee, Jack Herman, fan Jason Fisher. "Con of the Living Dead." Much gaming.

18-20—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Schoen, Mayo, Eric "in the elevator" Zuckerman.

18-20—FantaSciCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. [fantasci.com](http://fantasci.com). Howard Johnson's Plaza Hotel, Chattanooga TN.

18-20—AllCon, Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. [all-con.org](http://all-con.org). Dallas, TX. Media and costuming emphasis.

18-20—Anime Matsuri. [animematsuri.com](http://animematsuri.com). Houston TX.

18-20—Zenkaikon, 421 Evergreen Ave., Hatboro PA 19040. [zenkaikon.com](http://zenkaikon.com). Convention Center, King of Prussia PA. Anime.

18-20—A & G Ohio, 3907 Chickadee Ct., Westerville OH 43081. [aandgohio.com](http://aandgohio.com). Cincinnati OH. Anime and gaming ("A & G").

25-26—Conference on Middle Earth, c/o Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. [3rdcome.org](http://3rdcome.org). Regency Inn, Westford MA. Tolkien's works.

25-27—MidSouthCon, Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187. [midsouthcon.org](http://midsouthcon.org). [info@midsouthcon.org](mailto:info@midsouthcon.org). "Multi-genre convention."

25-27—AggieCon, Cepheid Variable (958460), Box 5688, College Station TX 77844. [aggiecon.tamu.edu](http://aggiecon.tamu.edu). Valente, Adams, Merke.

25-27—Anime Conji. [animeconji.org](http://animeconji.org). Town & Country resort, San Diego CA.

## APRIL 2011

1-3—BabelCon, Box 86580, Baton Rouge LA 70879. [babelcon.org](http://babelcon.org). Baton Rouge LA. SF, fantasy, and horror convention.

8-10—RavenCon, Box 36240, Richmond VA 23235. [ravencon.com](http://ravencon.com). Holiday Inn Select Koger Center, Richmond VA.

8-10—PortmeirionCon, 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19459. [sixfone.co.uk](http://sixfone.co.uk). Portmeirion UK. Its fans go where "The Prisoner" filmed.

15-17—ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. [iconsf.org](http://iconsf.org). State University of NY. Big convention of SF, fact, and fantasy.

15-17—JordanCon. [ageoflegends.net](http://ageoflegends.net). Crowne Plaza Ravinia, Atlanta GA. David B. Coe, Eugie Foster. Celebrating Robert Jordan.

22-24—MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. [mnstf.org](http://mnstf.org). Sheraton South, Bloomington MN. Charles Stross, Chas Somdahl.

28-May 1—World Horror Con, c/o ALAMO, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. [whc2011.org](http://whc2011.org). S. Langan, Joe R. Lonsdale, S. Niles.

28-May 1—Malice Domestic, Box 8007, Gaithersburg MD 20898. [malicedomestic.org](http://malicedomestic.org). Hyatt, Bethesda MD (near DC). Mysteries.

29-May 2—CostumeCon, 1973 Pine Ridge, Bushkill PA 18324. [cc29nj.com](http://cc29nj.com). Hilton, Hasbrouck Heights NJ (near NYC). Masqueraders.

## MAY 2011

6-8—LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85284. [leprecon.org](http://leprecon.org). Mission Palms. J. Picacio, E. Bear, S. Monette. Emphasis on art.

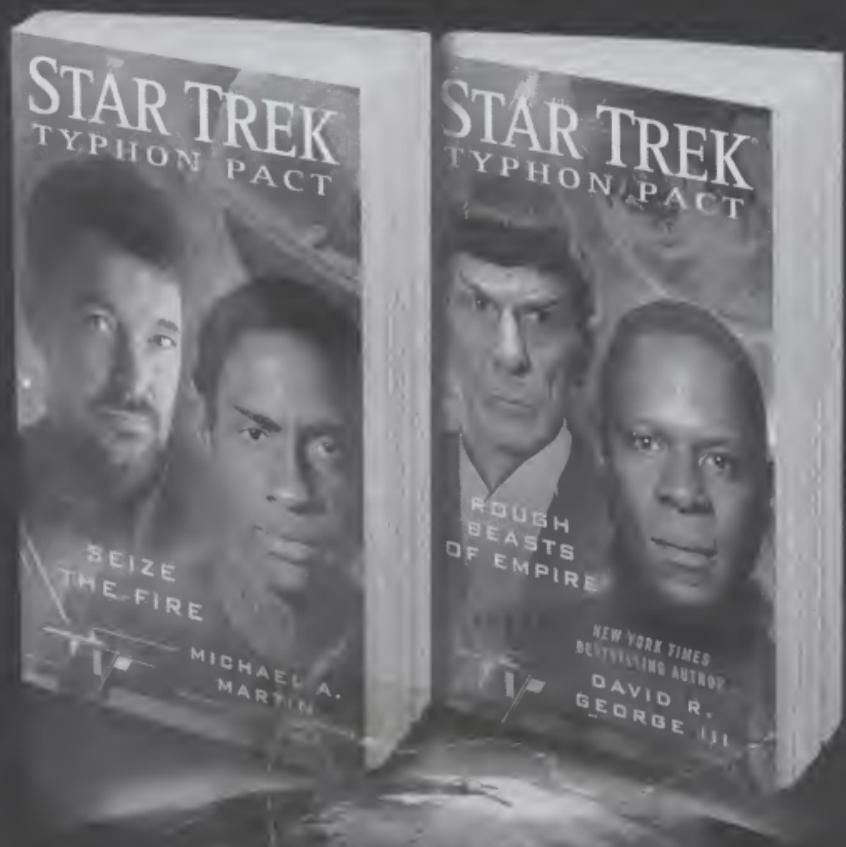
## AUGUST 2011

17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [renovationsforg.org](http://renovationsforg.org). Reno NV. Asher, C. Brown (I. M.), Powers. WorldCon. \$180+.

## AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. [chicon.org](http://chicon.org). Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$155.

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